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Religion
& Theology

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Comparative
& World Religion

Great World Religions: Judaism

Course Guidebook

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Dr. Gafni has written or edited 14 books on various aspects of Jewish history in late antiquity, as well as numerous scholarly articles (including more than 100 entries in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*). Two of his books discuss the history of the Jews in Talmudic Babylonia, for which he was awarded the 1992 Holon Prize in Jewish Studies. (His work *The Jews of Talmudic Babylonia: A Social and Cultural History* has recently been published in Russian.) One of Dr. Gafni's recent works, entitled *Land, Center and Diaspora: Jewish Constructs in Late Antiquity* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), addresses the complex relationships between the Jews of the diaspora and the land of Israel in late antiquity and deals with such topics as Jewish self-definition and the tension between "centrality of land" and "spiritual orientation" in a post-Temple context.

Dr. Gafni has devoted much effort to the dissemination of Jewish historical knowledge on a popular level, as well. He was on the founding faculty of Israel's Open University and wrote its first course in Jewish studies and the humanities ("From Jerusalem to Yavne"). For many years, Dr. Gafni

served as chairman of the publications committee of the Shazar Center for Jewish History, an extension of the Israel Historical Society. In 1996, Dr. Gafni was awarded the Hebrew University's Michael Milken Prize for exceptional teaching. ■

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Great World Religions: Judaism

Scope:

A frequently quoted story in rabbinic literature describes how a potential convert to Judaism approached two rabbinic sages of the 1st century B.C.E., requesting to be taught the entire corpus of Jewish teaching (the Torah) while standing on one foot. The first rabbi, Shammai, had little patience for such a frivolous request and responded by striking the enquirer with a rod he happened to be holding. The other sage, Hillel, replied by reciting one line that to his mind, indeed contained the essence of the Torah (I will divulge this line in Lecture 1). He then suggested that all the rest is merely commentary but urged the potential convert to go and study it nevertheless.

As we embark on a 12-lecture overview of Judaism, I can only empathize with those two sages and the predicament that confronted them; indeed, I wonder whether I should not have opted for Shammai's path when approached to produce this course.

This story stresses the idea that the request for a succinct presentation of the essence of Judaism came from an outsider looking in. As we will see in these lectures, however, Jews throughout history have also attempted to formulate brief summations of the essence—or uniqueness—of Judaism. The variety of suggestions, as well as the opposition at times to the very notion that this can be achieved without inadvertently relegating everything else to a secondary status, will inform us significantly on the diversity of Jewish self-definition throughout history.

The purpose of these lectures is to present Judaism *from within*, as it was understood by its adherents in the past and by those who practice or identify with Judaism today. That there are so many differences between past and present and, similarly, among Jews today, only attests to the impact that events and ideas throughout history have had on the nature of Jewish expression and behavior and the vitality with which Jews addressed those

changes while seeking to maintain a link and a sense of continuity with their ancient heritage.

The first three lectures provide a necessary overview and context for all our subsequent discussions. The opening lecture raises the question of whether Judaism is indeed a “religion” in the same sense that Christianity and Islam are religions. The second lecture offers a historical overview for understanding many of the subsequent issues to be taken up; it focuses on the “shared memory” or “collective history” of the earliest stages of Judaism, primarily the biblical and immediately post-biblical periods.

The third lecture introduces the major components of the Jewish library, inasmuch as almost every discussion of Judaism refers to written texts as the underpinnings of Jewish belief and practice. The fourth lecture helps to explain why Judaism, as it is practiced today, appears so different from the religion of the Hebrew Bible, which ostensibly is the basis for all subsequent Jewish behavior. The crucial event discussed here is the destruction of the Second Jewish Temple by the Romans in the year 70 C.E. and the necessary reformulation of much of Jewish tradition and practice in the wake of that watershed of Jewish history. Lectures 5 through 7 present the numerous ways in which Judaism manifests itself in the lives of its adherents on a personal level. These lectures introduce us to the way Jews worship, the yearly cycle of the Jewish calendar, and the outstanding events and rites of passage in a Jewish individual’s lifetime.

The eighth lecture brings us back to an issue already addressed in our opening discussion, namely how Jews understood the role of God in their lives. Here, however, we will examine more fully what Jews believed to be the nature of their relationship with God, both as individuals and as members of a distinct community.

The ninth lecture continues our examination of the variety of approaches embraced by Jewish thinkers in attempting to articulate, to themselves and often to others, their understanding of how the world functions and what man’s role in that world should be. Frequently, these examinations were the result of confrontation and outright religious polemics, but no less important

were intellectual and phenomenological crosscurrents that permeated Jewish society. Philosophers and mystics serve as the major focus of this lecture.

The tenth lecture investigates the legal aspects of Judaism. Beginning with the Hebrew Bible, Judaism produced a detailed legal system (*Halakha*) that addresses both the sacred and the seemingly secular aspects of life. This lecture also examines the status of Halakha among other branches of the contemporary Jewish community, thereby setting the stage for the eleventh lecture, which looks at the phenomenon of diversity in the world of Judaism. We consider the fact that diversity did not lead to total fragmentation and irreparable schisms. In discussing major groupings or denominations in Judaism today, we also examine the nature of the current challenge to unity and how different it is from earlier versions.

Our final lecture takes up the role and perception of “others” in Jewish thought. The tension between universalism and particularism, between God the Creator of the world and God who redeemed Israel from Egypt, is a constant factor not only in the Bible but in ongoing Jewish thought. Although our first lecture notes the ethnic component of Judaism, ethnicity never represented an impenetrable barrier preventing others from becoming full-fledged adherents of Judaism, as well as equal members of the community. ■

What Is Judaism?

Lecture 1

The overriding goal of this course will be to present Judaism from within, as its practitioners understood it.

Christianity and Islam are *faiths*, or “systems of beliefs,” that embrace diverse communities and ethnic groups throughout the world. Although Judaism also adheres to particular beliefs and practices, many Jews would nevertheless consider the designation of Judaism as a “religion” (or only a religion) as a far too narrow or confining categorization.

Judaism identifies its historical roots in the Hebrew Bible, referred to by Christians as the “Old Testament.” In that work, the ancestors and adherents of the system of beliefs we will discuss in this course were a distinct people, or nation, known as Israel. Biblical Israel considered its destiny attached to a particular land and linked its faith in God with God’s promise to give that land to the offspring of Israel’s founding patriarch, Abraham. For much of the biblical period, Israel was ruled as a monarchy (at first united, then divided into two smaller kingdoms). The monarchal dynasty of Israel, going back to King David, would serve as a symbol of unity and, ultimately, as the focus of belief in a future restoration. The biblical Israelites were instructed to refrain from intermarriage with surrounding tribes that might corrupt their faith; this enhanced even further the ethnic character of the adherents to the Israelite faith.

The origins of the word *Judaism* also point to the ethnic and geographical roots of the phrase, rather than to a solely religious entity. Judah was the fourth son of the patriarch Jacob, son of Isaac and grandson of Abraham, the biblical progenitors of “the People of Israel.” Israel was the subsequent name given to Jacob in the biblical book of Genesis. With the establishment of an Israelite kingdom, the monarchy that would rule over it for approximately four centuries was founded by King David, a descendant of the tribe of Judah. The kingdom would ultimately go by the name of Judah; thus, the name took on a political, as well as geographical, significance.

Jews (or Judaeans) were, in the first instance, those people either living in the land of that name or whose roots were in that land, even if their ancestors had chosen to live elsewhere or had been forcibly removed from it in the context of some military conquest. It was only in the Hellenistic period (2nd century B.C.E.) that the word *Judaism* (or *Ioudaismos* in Greek) appeared for the first time, as the designation of a *culture*, or “way of life,” maintained by those people linked to the land of “Judaea.”

The term *Judaism* appears for the first time in the Second Book of Maccabees (2:21; 14:38), a work written by a Jew living in a Greek-speaking environment and describing the clash between the Jews of Judaea and the Hellenistic rulers of that territory, the Syrian Seleucid monarchy and its king, Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175–162 B.C.E.). That same book also contains the earliest use of the term *Hellenism*.

Notwithstanding the national and ethnic components of Judaism, religion, expressed as a system of beliefs and practices, was certainly a critical component of Jewish self-perception. Over the centuries, various attempts at defining the essence of that religion have been made.

Some attempts have designated portions of biblical Scripture as representing the essence of what would emerge as Judaism. One common belief is that Judaism is summarized in the Decalogue, or Ten Commandments, given by God to Israel at Mount Sinai

(Exod. 20:1–14; Deut. 5:6–18).

These commandments, as noted in later rabbinic literature, comprise the dual foci of the Jewish religion. The first five deal with relations between man and God, such as the requirement to believe in the one God, worship no other deities, and refrain from referring to

God’s name in vain (such as by taking false oaths; interestingly, the fifth commandment, to honor one’s parents, was justified by later rabbis as part of man’s commitment to God). The latter five regulate relations among humans, by prohibiting murder, adultery, stealing, and so on. In the first

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centuries C.E., we actually find some rabbinic figures opposed to the special role of the Ten Commandments in synagogue liturgy, because this role might render a secondary status to all the other portions of the Bible. Other attempts have focused on a particular biblical Scripture, such as the prophet Habakuk's statement: "The righteous [person] shall live by his faith" (Hab. 2:4). According to this approach, the dominant element is a trust in God, with apparently everything else evolving from this.

Common to these attempts to represent the essence of Judaism is the wish not to go beyond the biblical text itself, by enunciating a more comprehensive and detailed creed. Nevertheless, Judaism has been subjected to a wide variety of post-biblical attempts at isolating what was considered to represent the most basic components of the faith. Although it states that "all Israelites have a share in the world to come," the rabbinic text known as the Mishnah (we will discuss this work in Lecture Three) lists the following exceptions: One who says that there is no resurrection of the dead prescribed in the Torah; one who says that the Torah is not from heaven (that is, not of divine origin), and an Epicurean (the rabbis adopted the name of the well-known Greek philosopher as a symbol of heretic beliefs).

In rabbinic discussions of martyrdom and the conditions that would justify accepting death rather than transgressing the law, the bottom line renders the maintenance of life supreme, save for three transgressions that must be avoided at all costs, even if martyrdom is the only alternative. These three sins are: idolatry, forbidden sexual relations, and the shedding of blood (that is, murder). Hillel, replying to a convert's request for a crash course in Judaism, reduces the entire Torah to one principle: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow man."

These attempts, however, are not presented as creedal affirmations or catechisms, and such formulations are significantly missing from the rabbinic literature of the first centuries C.E. In the Middle Ages, however, the search for the "roots," or essence, of Judaism became more common. The search for the "principles" of the Jewish religion was probably motivated, or partially encouraged, by a number of external factors. The contemplative activity of Islamic theologians, known as *kalam*, and their speculations regarding the nature of religious faith, spread to Jewish thinkers as well. Confrontation

and frequent polemics with the Christian and Moslem worlds enhanced the perception of a need to articulate the differences between Judaism and the two other monotheistic faiths.

The most famous attempt at formulating a list of Judaism's "principles" was made by the renowned Jewish philosopher of the 12th century, Maimonides, replying to a convert's request:

- The existence of God. God's unity.
- God has no corporeal aspect.
- God is eternal.
- God alone (and no intermediaries) should be worshipped.
- Belief in prophecy.
- Moses was the greatest of prophets.
- All of the Torah in our possession is divine and was given through Moses.
- The Torah will not be changed or superseded.
- God knows the actions of man.
- God rewards those who keep the Torah and punishes those who transgress it.
- Belief that the Messiah will come.
- Belief in the resurrection of the dead.

Some of these principles were apparently aimed at refuting what Maimonides believed were major challenges posed by Islam and Christianity. The seventh principle clearly rejects the roles ascribed to Muhammad and Jesus in Islam and Christianity. The ninth principle is a direct response to claims for supersession of the Torah and abrogation of the practices laid out in that corpus by the subsequent teachings of the two younger religions.

Maimonides's formulation appeared at first as a commentary to the Mishnah, but by the 16th century, it was published with each of his principles preceded by the affirmation: "I believe with absolute faith that..." This type of formulation is the first actual presentation of a catechism in Judaism and was clearly influenced by similar phenomena in the Christian world. The list of principles ultimately found its way into Jewish prayer books and was the



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Maimonides (1135–1204), a Jewish philosopher, developed a list of elements that characterized his religion and distinguished it from other faiths.

Isaac Abravanel. Writing around the year 1500, he maintained that the very notion of “principles” in the Torah suggests differing levels of sanctity or truth in that very same text, thereby also encouraging a sort of heresy.

By listing principles of faith, Maimonides was not ignoring the ethnic or communal aspect of Judaism. Following his enumeration of the 13 principles, he states that one who does not believe in any of these principles effectively removes himself from the community of Israel. The link between the communal and the spiritual components of Judaism has found other expressions, as well. The central work of Jewish mysticism, the *Zohar*, is the source for the statement that God, Israel, and Torah are one; that is, they are inseparably linked. Modern realities would inject new thinking regarding the relationship between the communal and religious aspects of Judaism.

The attempts by Western societies in the 18th century to grant Jews equal rights (“emancipation”), while encouraging them to embrace the values and social mores of their modern surroundings, ultimately led to attempts by some Jews to downplay the communal and national roots of Judaism and stress the religious component. The two results of this new definition of Judaism were frequently either outright assimilation into the new open

basis for a popular poem, known as the “*Yigdal hymn*,” sung to this day in synagogues.

Although ultimately embraced by broad segments of the traditional Jewish community, Maimonides’s list engendered a widespread reaction among Jewish thinkers after its appearance. Some attempted to shorten the list; others, to refine it or add certain aspects they considered to have been overlooked, while yet others opposed the whole enterprise. Noteworthy among these was

society or a reforming of Jewish practice and beliefs that would, it was hoped, render them more adaptable to the new political and social realities. In the 19th century, we encounter Jews for whom all religious manifestations of Judaism were unacceptable, and here, the pendulum will swing in the totally opposite direction, toward a heightened rediscovery of the national and ethnic components of Judaism. Of the many political groups to emerge from this reappraisal, the national Jewish movement known as Zionism would have the greatest impact. ■

Essential Reading

De Lange, Nicholas. *An Introduction to Judaism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Supplemental Reading

Neusner, Jacob. *Judaism: An Introduction*. London: Penguin, 2002.

Seltzer, Robert M. *Jewish People, Jewish Thought: The Jewish Experience in History*. New York: Macmillan, 1980.

Questions to Consider

1. Do you think that most Jews in the United States today would consider Judaism a religion, or would they prefer a different definition?
2. Why do you think that many Jewish thinkers were not eager to formulate lists of principles to which all Jews must adhere?

The Stages of History

Lecture 2

Past and present come together in much of Judaism's self-image, resulting in a variety of practical manifestations.

For Jews, there is a collective past that contributes enormously to their sense of unity and without which Judaism cannot be understood. The collective memory in Judaism is not merely a sequence of events that once transpired, but a story to be studied, transmitted, and in certain cases, even re-lived. The liberation, or *exodus*, of the Israelites from Egypt is not only discussed but, in a sense, re-lived at the yearly festival of Passover. Rabbinic tradition proclaims that the souls of all the future adherents to Judaism were actually present at the revelation of God at Mount Sinai. Jews mourn the destruction of the two Temples in Jerusalem to this day, with a series of fast days commemorating the various events connected to these ancient watersheds in Jewish religious tradition. Jews at prayer frequently turn to the past as part of their supplications regarding the present (or the future). Divine promises to the biblical patriarchs, or examples of their perfect faith, serve as arguments in petitioning God to have pity on their descendants in the present. Judaism represents an ongoing but constantly changing saga of 4,000 years. Each period left its distinct mark; thus, although certain basic beliefs were fixed, new expressions were constantly being added—or taking the place of earlier ones.

The biblical period spans a period of 1,400 years. It begins with the earliest roots of the patriarchal family of Israel and its intimate relationship with God. The Bible then records the stages leading to the emergence of the Israelites as a nation: their liberation from bondage; acceptance of a body of teaching (Torah), revealed to them through Moses; and finally, the establishment of a kingdom in the land promised to their patriarchs.

Israelite history and religion both begin with the same figure: the patriarch Abraham. Abraham is not only the progenitor of the Israelite people but also the father of its faith. He is described in the Bible as “having faith in God” (Gen. 15:6) and would later be perceived as the first human both to recognize

God's existence and to remove himself from the pervasive idolatrous culture of his day.

Abraham's faith is later tested by God's commandment and Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac. The story became a defining moment for Jews throughout history, whose willingness to accept all sorts of pain and adversity while remaining steadfast in their faith would repeatedly be compared to that of their patriarch Abraham. In later Jewish liturgy, God is repeatedly asked to remember Abraham's total commitment as justification for forgiving his seed's frequent lapses. In later times, the rabbis project Abraham as also seeking converts to Judaism.

The events surrounding the patriarchs represent the earliest strands of a collective memory that binds all the subsequent adherents to Judaism. As such, our interest is not in establishing their historicity, nor does the Bible itself attempt to contextualize these stories into a broader historical framework. It should, however, be noted that scholars have tended to place the migratory processes alluded to in the stories of the patriarchs somewhere within the 20th and 16th centuries B.C.E.

The second critical stage in the biblical account of Israel's emergence as a nation is the bondage of Abraham's descendants in Egypt for hundreds of years, culminating with their exodus from that land under the leadership of Moses. The biblical book of Genesis has God informing Abraham centuries in advance of this process; this would lend a crucial sense of providential involvement in all the subsequent history of Israel, thereby stressing that nothing in the nation's history transpires by chance.

The centuries of bondage in Egypt coincide with Israel's transformation from an extended family of some 70 people to a nation of hundreds of thousands. Preceded by divine intervention and punishment of the Egyptians for their cruel enslavement, the Israelites are led out of Egypt by Moses, the most important figure in the emergence of Judaism. The miraculous redemption was destined to become one of the great defining moments in the collective memory of Judaism, enhanced even more by the first of God's Ten Commandments: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage. You shall have no other Gods but me..."

(Exod. 20:2). The liberation from Egypt often serves as a prototype for hopes of a future redemption in Jewish history and is alluded to regularly in Jewish prayer.

Wandering in the desert, the Israelites arrive at Mount Sinai, where the ultimate revelation takes place. God calls Moses to the top of the mountain, where he stays for 40 days and nights. While on the mountain, Moses receives from God a complete system of laws and instruction, which he

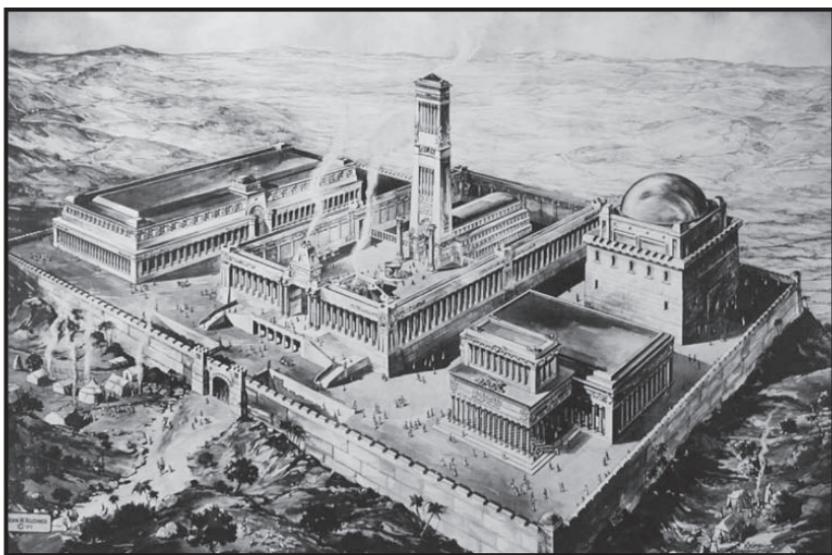
**The vast majority of Jews
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subsequently transmits to the People of Israel. This “teaching,” known as the *Torah*, will serve as the divine basis for all subsequent aspects of Jewish law and behavior. Traditional Judaism accepts that all the five Books of Moses, the Pentateuch, were dictated by God to Moses at Sinai. The more liberal denominations of contemporary Judaism, following modern scholarship,

have modified this article of faith by assigning a greater role for human authorship of the Torah. Having received their physical freedom and spiritual substructure, the final stage of the primal ethnographic saga was now ready. After wandering for 40 years in the desert, the Israelites, under the leadership of Moses’s successor, Joshua, capture the land of Canaan, thus fulfilling God’s promise to the patriarchs.

The subsequent portions of the Hebrew Bible now describe the stages in the establishment of Israel as a nation in its land. Following conquest and a period of political consolidation under a series of “judges,” a monarchy finally emerged. David, the second king of Israel, whose reign is commonly dated to the 10th century B.C.E., was the founder of a monarchical dynasty that would rule Israel for four centuries, until the fall of the Kingdom of Judah in 586 B.C.E. to the Babylonians.

The period of the Davidic monarchy coincides with two major phenomena, both having a lasting effect on Judaism as a religion. David moved his capital to Jerusalem, and under his son Solomon, a Temple was established as the focal point of Jewish worship.



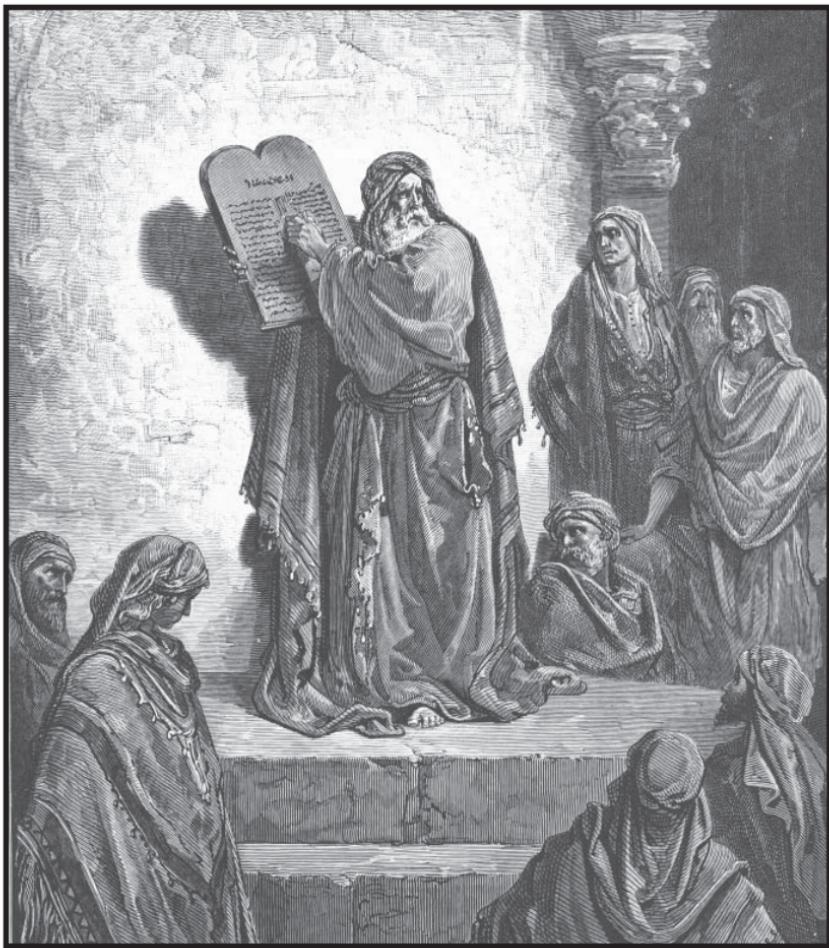
Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-12561.

Under the monarchy of Solomon, a temple was built in Jerusalem. Henceforth, Jerusalem would have a dual role as both the political capital and religious center of Judaism.

The period of the monarchy coincides with the appearance of the great prophets of Israel. Their teachings, stressing the moral and ethical imperatives of the nation and its rulers, serve as a cornerstone of Christianity, as well as Judaism. The Jewish reform movement that emerged in the 19th century attributes a heightened significance to the words of the prophets, in many ways surpassing the prominence of the Torah, whose practical commandments it no longer considered binding.

The fall of the kingdom in 586 B.C.E., coupled with the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, marks the end of the first and formative section of Jewish history. The Hebrew Bible ends with the first stirrings of restoration, facilitated by the declaration of the Persian King Cyrus that allowed the captives in Babylon to return to Zion and rebuild a temple. The Second Temple of Jerusalem was completed in 516 B.C.E. and stood until its destruction by the Romans in 70 C.E. The events and changes that transpired in this second stage of Judaism's development were of major significance.

Ruled by a succession of conquering empires (Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman) for most of this period, and without a continuation of biblical prophecy, a new model of Jewish spiritual leadership, in the form of sages versed in the Torah, began to appear. One of the prototypes of this new form



Dore Bible Illustrations, Courtesy of Dover Pictorial Archive Series.

With no Jewish monarchy, spiritual leaders who knew and could teach the Bible emerged. The first example of this might be in the Book of Ezra, where Ezra is one of the leaders of the returnees from Zion.

of leadership was Ezra the Scribe. These scholars served as forerunners to the rabbinic phenomenon.

With the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E., Judaism encountered a major challenge to its very existence. Without a recognized and unifying cultic center, and without access to sacrificial worship as the prime mode of religious expression, new systems and contexts for Jewish religious life began to emerge.

In the Middle Ages, new challenges appeared. The vast majority of Jews no longer resided in a Jewish homeland but were dispersed throughout lands controlled by either Moslem or Christian rulers. No less important were the intellectual challenges to Judaism from the theologians of both religions. This reality stimulated an enormous literary output, including philosophical treatises, a growing corpus of mystical literature, polemical works, and the expansion and application of the existing legal system of Judaism to meet new realities. With all their differences, the vast majority of Jews throughout the world during the Middle Ages still adhered to the major guidelines and practical strictures of Judaism.

The modern world, beginning with the Enlightenment of the 18th century and continuing with the major political upheavals of the 19th century, introduced totally new challenges. For the first time, Christian society in Western Europe opened its gates to the admission of Jews, conditional on Jewish willingness to forego some of the norms of religious behavior that tended to keep them apart. Assimilation became an ever-growing challenge to the Jewish world.

Deriving from the Enlightenment movement, Jews began to raise serious questions regarding the nature of their religious beliefs. Critical study of the Bible was one of many factors that encouraged the establishment of circles of Jewish intellectuals striving to introduce the fruits of new research into the lives and beliefs of the practitioners of Judaism. Traditional Jewish practice and belief was now challenged by a reform movement, ultimately leading to an unprecedented split in the ranks of adherents to Judaism. For the first

time, adherence to Jewish *Halakha*, that is, its all-embracing legal system, was not accepted by all Jews as an absolute requirement of Judaism. ■

Essential Reading

Johnson, Paul. *A History of the Jews*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987.

Supplemental Reading

Barnavi, Eli, ed. *A Historical Atlas of the Jewish People: From the Time of the Patriarchs to the Present*. London: Hutchinson, 1992.

Questions to Consider

1. Jews were very aware of their common past, yet never developed a historiographical tradition similar to that of the Greeks or Romans. What might be the reasons for this?
2. Why did the emergence of a widespread Jewish diaspora create questions of Jewish identity that were not addressed in the Bible?

The Jewish Library

Lecture 3

The author of the biblical work known as Ecclesiastes ends his book with an interesting warning: “Of making many books there is no end, and much study is weariness of the flesh” (Eccl. 12:12). The irony, of course, is that if Jews had a propensity for anything, it was precisely for the production of many books!

The centerpiece of all Judaism—its beliefs, rituals, and laws—is the Hebrew Bible. The term *Bible* originated among Christians, and although English-speaking Jews might also use the phrase today, this frequently causes misunderstanding. Christians refer to both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament as the Bible, whereas Jews apply the phrase only to the Hebrew Bible. A more common designation among many Jews today for the Hebrew Bible would be the Hebrew acronym Tanakh. This word is composed of the first Hebrew letters that designate the three component parts of the Hebrew Bible. The first part is known as the Torah, or five Books of Moses (hence, the Pentateuch). The second part is Nevi’im (Hebrew for “prophets”). The third part is called Ketuvim (Hebrew for “scriptures”).

The Torah reigns supreme in terms of prestige and sanctity. It is considered by traditional Jews to have been given in its entirety to Moses at Sinai. It is read regularly as part of the synagogue ritual (and probably even preceded the institution of public prayer). It can be produced only for ritual purposes in a very special manner, on parchment with quill and special ink. Chronologically, the Torah begins with creation and ends with the death of Moses. Almost all the legal components of Judaism are considered to have their source in the Torah. In antiquity, this was the primary text (and probably the only one) taught to children who received a formal education.

The books that make up the Prophets cover the period from Israel’s settlement in Canaan, after Moses’s death, until the destruction of the First Temple in 586 B.C.E. Although some of these books contain historical narratives, the majority present the exhortations of the prophets to their

contemporaries. These include the castigation of the people and their leaders for their sins, the foretelling of imminent or distant events, and the hopes for a rejuvenated national and universal order. The Prophets enjoy a secondary role in the synagogue service, where only portions are read after the major



Traditional Jews believe that the Torah was given in its entirety to Moses at Mount Sinai.

Dore Bible Illustrations. Courtesy of Dover Platonic Archive Series.

Torah reading. Prophets are not understood to be able to introduce new laws or abrogate existing ones. Their role is primarily to promote requisite moral behavior.

The Ketuvim are a collection of variegated genres: wisdom literature, poetry, historical works. The largest book in this section is the Psalms. The five “scrolls” (Hebrew: Megillot) in Ketuvim are: the Book of Esther, the Song of Songs, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Ruth. Each is read in synagogues on a specific festival day. Among the other books of this section are: Job, Proverbs, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and the two Books of Chronicles.

Jews continued to produce books throughout much of the Second Temple period. Many of these works were expansions or elaborations of the Bible. Some of these books dealt with events of the day, such as the books that describe the clashes between the Hellenistic rulers of Judaea and the Jews (these are known as the Books of Maccabees). Almost all the books produced in the final centuries B.C.E. and the first century C.E. were not preserved as part of a post-biblical Jewish canon; they survived because they were preserved by the Christian Church. Even the writings of the renowned Jewish historian Josephus or those of the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria were preserved only in Church collections.

The second major corpus of Jewish literature was produced by the formulators of rabbinic Judaism during the first six centuries C.E. The rabbinic corpus contains two major literary genres. The Books of Midrash follow the biblical text—primarily the Torah—as a sort of commentary. Midrash does not limit itself to scriptural exegesis but, in fact, contains almost every type of popular literary genre: fables, exempla, parables, and much more. The second genre is of a legal nature, arranged according to topics. The central legal text of rabbinic Judaism is the Mishnah. Its six sections cover all aspects of Jewish religious and social behavior. The major topics of these six sections are: laws of agriculture, festivals, marriage laws, torts, laws pertaining to the temple, and aspects of ritual purity. The Mishna, completed in the early 3rd century C.E., became the basis for all subsequent rabbinic legislation. The next few centuries produced two major works based on the Mishna and known as the Talmud. By this time, rabbinic centers of learning existed both in Palestine and Babylonia, and each of these produced its own Talmud. In time, the

Babylonian Talmud assumed a preferred status and was widely used as the basis for later legislation. The Palestinian Talmud (known as the Yerushalmi or Jerusalem Talmud) was studied far less frequently.

Whereas the Talmud would serve as a basis for Jewish law, it is anything but a law manual or legal code. The Talmud is the embodiment of 300 years of rabbinic learning. For hundreds of years, the Talmud was used as the basis for formulating systematic legal texts. One approach, used most famously by the 12th-century legal scholar and philosopher known as Maimonides, was to remove the names of the participants in the Talmudic discussions, thereby projecting attributed opinions as the universally recognized law. Maimonides was only one of numerous legal authorities striving to codify rabbinic legal tradition. Over the centuries, numerous compilations appeared. The most famous of these is known as *Shulhan Arukh* (Hebrew: “*Spread Table*”) and was compiled by Rabbi Joseph Karo in the 16th century. The book, based on earlier works, divides all of Jewish law and practice into four sections: rituals of daily life (such as prayer, Sabbath, holidays); dietary laws; laws of marriage and divorce; and civil law. In a sense, the appearance of the *Shulhan Arukh* marks a turning point in Jewish life, a literary demarcation between the Middle Ages and early modernity.

Jews in general are brought up as bibliophiles. When a book falls to the ground, the custom is to pick it up and kiss it.

A different type of primarily legal literature is known as *responsa*. For centuries, Jewish authorities were asked questions not only by their local community but by Jews who considered their opinions the definitive statement on any legal issue. There are literally thousands of such compilations, and their importance transcends the limited issues they take up. For historians, they serve as a major source for social history—something frequently overlooked by those texts addressing the “greater” issues of the day.

Medieval Judaism produced another genre of religious literature that had a profound influence on all subsequent students of Torah. These were the various Bible commentaries, produced in almost every land where Jews resided. The most famous of all commentators was a rabbi of 11th-century

France, commonly referred to as Rashi (1040–1105; his full name is Solomon ben Isaac). Rashi's genius was in addressing a text, whether the Bible or the Talmud, and clarifying in the most succinct way every difficult word, as well as giving a sense of the complete text.

If there was one book that defined Jewish behavior and beliefs, and with which even laymen were familiar, it was the Jewish Prayer Book. The earliest prayer books probably date to the 8th or 9th centuries, produced by the heads of the Babylonian academies. Centuries before the appearance of the current denominations in Judaism, we encounter a wide variety of prayer books, representing not only the customs of local communities but distinct groups within the wider Jewish population. For example, numerous differences exist between Jews of Spanish, North African, or Middle Eastern backgrounds (Sephardim) and those of European areas (Ashkenazim).

Jews in general are brought up as bibliophiles. When a book falls to the ground, the custom is to pick it up and kiss it. Old books that are no longer in use are not simply discarded but, instead, are buried. This custom is known as *geniza* (literally, “storing or hiding”), and the 19th-century discovery of one such repository in Cairo has kept scholars busy for the past century, examining hitherto unknown texts and other documents. ■

Essential Reading

Holtz, Barry W. *The Schocken Guide to Jewish Books*. New York: Schocken, 1992.

Supplemental Reading

Gersh, Harry. *The Sacred Books of the Jews*. New York: Stein and Day, 1968.

Holtz, Barry W. *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts*. New York: Summit Books, 1984.

Questions to Consider

1. Many Jewish books written in the centuries after the biblical period were produced pseudoepigraphically (that is, with false names for the authors). Why do you think this was so?
2. Why do you think we did not touch on “secular” literature produced by Jews in antiquity and the Middle Ages?

The Emergence of Rabbinic Judaism

Lecture 4

If the faith and behavior prescribed by Judaism are indeed derived primarily from the Bible, why is the Judaism we encounter today, even among its most zealous practitioners, so different from the biblical representation of that very same religious tradition?

Judaism points to the Bible as the source of its faith and religious behavior, yet when we compare the Judaism practiced today, even by its most zealous adherents, with the religious behavior mandated by the Bible, we encounter major discrepancies. The Bible stresses the importance of worshipping God at a single, central institution, ultimately represented by the Temple in Jerusalem. Decentralization of the cult was frowned upon. Today, however, Jews worship in synagogues, and these are located wherever a sufficient number of Jews warrants their establishment. The Israelites of the Bible were required to serve God through an elaborate system of sacrificial worship, that is, by slaughtering animals on an altar at the temple. This activity was conducted primarily by the members of a particular family, known as priests. Today, the most common mode of worship in Judaism is through prayer, and no priests are required. The most visible form of religious leadership among Jews today is the rabbinic model. But whereas the Bible describes the role and functions of kings, priests, and prophets, there is no mention of rabbis anywhere.

These changes are just a few of the major adjustments that resulted from what was arguably the most traumatic event in Judaism's long history: the destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70 C.E., following a four-year uprising against the Roman rulers of Judaea. The Second Temple had stood in Jerusalem for almost 600 years (516 B.C.E.–70 C.E.). Viewed in historical perspective, the sudden loss of the center of Jewish life for practitioners of Judaism throughout the world must have been devastating. The First Temple, of biblical times, stood for approximately 400 years (c. 960 B.C.E.–586 B.C.E.). Save for a 70-year interval, Jews had worshipped for a thousand years in the manner prescribed by the Bible. The sudden absence of a temple demanded a theological explanation, as well as practical adjustments to the

new reality. Some other sources describe groups of Jews entering a state of perpetual mourning and assuming a life of ascetic abstinence. Rabbinic stories describe one sage—Rabbi Joshua—arguing with these ascetics and claiming that such extreme reactions to the destruction can only lead to an ultimate negation of life itself. His solution, as opposed to theirs, was to establish formal symbols of mourning that would maintain the memory of the destroyed Temple, but otherwise, to get on with life.

Rabbinic literature ascribes the efforts to create alternative systems of Jewish religious expression to one sage in particular: Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai. Not surprisingly, ben Zakkai was Rabbi Joshua's mentor. The Mishna attributes to Yohanan ben Zakkai a number of ordinances, all intended to establish alternative religious practices or to permit those once carried out only in the Temple to now be practiced elsewhere. These ordinances also suggest the establishment of a revised authority structure in the absence of the old priestly system. Rabbinic legends even claim that Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai was granted permission by the Romans to establish a limited rabbinic center at Yavne, a small town off the southern coast of Palestine. These legends and traditions were probably put into literary form years, even generations, after the death of Yohanan ben Zakkai, but they testify to the establishment of totally new systems and contexts for the maintenance of Judaism as a vital religion, notwithstanding the destruction of its previous historic frameworks.

The Bible describes the role and functions of kings, priests, and prophets. There is no mention of rabbis anywhere.

The revitalized Judaism of the post-Temple period, which set the patterns of Jewish behavior for all subsequent generations, is commonly referred to as *rabbinic Judaism*. The word *rabbi* means, literally, “master.” In the context of our discussion, however, it is the designation of a sage, or teacher of Torah. The restructuring of Jewish religious expression after the destruction can be defined as a sort of spiritualizing process, in which the rabbis were the main motivators. Jewish religious expression became decentralized, no longer requiring a single, geographically determined focal point. The

exclusivity of one temple was replaced by the legitimacy of synagogues that could now function as “minor sanctuaries,” ultimately even assuming a status of sacred space. The rabbinic period introduced a new system of daily public prayer. With the priests having lost their major power base, the rabbis would slowly assume a more central position in the community. Whereas the priestly claim to authority rested on lineage, the rabbi’s authority was earned through learning and individual charisma. Rabbis were mobile; therefore, they could attract disciples and establish local centers of learning throughout Judaea and, ultimately, in portions of the Jewish diaspora, as well (primarily in Babylonia).

Rabbinic Judaism stressed the study of Torah, not merely as a means of determining what God desires of man but as a central form of religious devotion in itself. The new centers of rabbinic activity embarked on an enhanced interpretation of all earlier religious traditions. As noted in Lecture Three, by the 3rd century, new compilations of legal and homiletical works (Mishnah and Midrash) began to appear. These, in turn, would be examined and serve as the basis for three centuries of further study, culminating in the appearance of the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds. The sum total of rabbinic teaching during the five to six centuries after the destruction came to be known as the *oral tradition*. This designation suggests a mass of material that complements the *written tradition*, which, of course, was the Bible itself. The two were destined to become inseparable and serve as the basis for almost all subsequent intellectual and legal activity.

Yohanan ben Zakkai’s stress on “acts of loving kindness” as a suitable alternative to sacrificial worship may strike a chord of resonance in Christian circles, as does the whole process of “spiritualization” or ritual. Indeed, both Christianity, in its earliest Judaic setting, and rabbinic Judaism survived the destruction precisely because neither group was temple-oriented. The difference, however, between the two groups was critical. For Christians, the destruction was vindication or proof of Christianity’s earliest messages, inasmuch as Jesus himself was quoted as prophesizing that “no stone would be left unturned” in Jerusalem. For the rabbis, the destruction posed major theological and practical problems. The rabbis never presented their teachings as a system that superseded the Bible. The success of rabbinic Judaism was precisely in the balance between obvious innovation and

continuous emphasis on the continuity of their teachings with those of the written Bible. ■

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Supplemental Reading

Neusner, Jacob. *Judaism: The Evidence of the Mishna*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.

Schiffman, Lawrence H. *From Text to Tradition: A History of Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism*. Hoboken: Ktav, 1991.

Urbach, Ephraim E. *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975.

Questions to Consider

1. Do you think Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai was aware of the fact that he might be refashioning Judaism for posterity, or might he have thought he was merely suggesting a temporary framework until the rebuilding of a Third Temple?
2. Why have some people referred to the processes described in this lecture as a “spiritualization” of Judaism?

Jewish Worship—Prayer and the Synagogue

Lecture 5

What do Jewish prayers contain? When are they conducted? In what language are they recited? Are the liturgical texts fixed or constantly updated? Are prayers recited only in synagogues?

Turning to God in moments of need—praying—has definite biblical roots and was performed by both private individuals and public figures. Prayer, however, was not the standard means of worshipping God in the Hebrew Bible. As long as the First and Second Jewish Temples stood, prayer never displaced sacrifice as the primary mode of public worship. However, Jews in the diaspora, without access to a temple, may have developed some sort of alternative system of prayer; the earliest synagogues known to us, from 3rd-century B.C.E. Egypt, were called *proseuche* in Greek, which means “[place of] prayer.” Certain Jews in Judaea may also have developed systems of prayer. This might have been the case of sectarians, such as those who produced the Dead Sea Scrolls and who refused to participate in worship at Jerusalem.

Nevertheless, diaspora Jews throughout much of the Second Temple period sent funds to Jerusalem for the purpose of participating in the purchase of animals for sacrifice and obviously thought that this was a religious requirement of all God-fearing Jews. A dedicatory inscription from a 1st-century C.E. synagogue in Jerusalem enumerates the functions for which that synagogue was established: public reading of the Torah, teaching of the commandments, and for use as a bathing facility and housing for the needy from abroad. No mention is made of the role of prayer in that synagogue.

As noted in the previous lecture, the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E. required alternative modes of worship. Prayer emerged almost universally as the substitute for sacrifice. Rabbinic Judaism, beginning in the aftermath of the destruction, set up a formal system of prayer. Although never denying the individual permission to pray when he or she desires, the rabbis were intent on establishing a fixed framework that would determine when people prayed, where they prayed, and what the major components

of that prayer would include. The basic frameworks established in the first centuries C.E., notwithstanding numerous additions and differences among various communities, remained fixed until the modern era.

Inasmuch as prayer took the place of sacrifice, originally there seem to have been two mandatory times for daily prayer, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon, replacing the two daily sacrifices at the Temple. A third evening prayer was also declared obligatory by the rabbis. All three daily prayer gatherings, as well as those of Sabbath and holidays, contain a central prayer composed of 19 blessings on weekdays (fewer on holidays), known as the *Amidah*, or “prayer said while standing.” Each of its blessings details one of God’s attributes (“reviver of the dead,” “dispenser of wisdom,” “builder of Jerusalem”). The concluding blessing praises God “who blesses his people Israel with peace.”

The *Amidah* projects prayer not merely as a list of praises and requests, but as a public declaration of the national and religious aspirations of the Jewish community. A study of Jewish prayer would probably be the ideal way of examining Jewish self-identity. In the morning and evening service, the *Amidah* is preceded by the recitation of three chapters from the Torah: Deuteronomy 6:4–9; Deuteronomy 11:13–21, and Numbers 15:37–41. These chapters frequently are seen as the ultimate affirmation of a Jew’s faith, with the opening line of the first chapter proclaiming: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.” (The Hebrew words opening this scripture—*Shma Yisrael*—have determined the name for the entire prayer: the *Shma*.) The *Shma* assumed an importance far beyond daily prayer. It is, if possible, the ideal dying statement of a Jew as the soul departs, and it became the affirmation of faith recited by martyrs at different stages of Jewish history, most recently during the Holocaust.

Two blessings precede the *Shma* and two follow between its recitation and that of the *Amidah*. Before the first blessing, there is a brief call to prayer, recited by the public leader of the service and repeated by the others present. Morning prayers begin with the recitation of a number of chapters from the Psalms.

Until the 19th century, the universal language of prayer in Judaism was Hebrew. The rabbis of the first centuries C.E. permitted prayer in other languages if Hebrew was unknown. But their preference was always Hebrew, the common language of Jewish ritual, as well as religious literature. The reform movement among Jews in Germany raised the question of language, and it became the topic of bitter debate among various groups that had distanced themselves by varying degrees from Orthodox Jewry. Although the latter maintained Hebrew as the primary language of prayer, significant portions of prayer in local languages can be found among other denominations. The 20th-century revival of the Hebrew language as part of the Jewish national movement has led to an enhanced use of Hebrew even among non-Orthodox groups.

Liturgy in Judaism, while maintaining a basic structure, was constantly enhanced. Particular periods of productivity were the Byzantine age in Palestine and Moslem Spain. Poets might compose new prayers to be recited and, in certain cases, actually perform them before the community. The latter did not always understand these new compositions, because they required not only a precise knowledge of Hebrew, but also a familiarity with the corpus of

biblical and rabbinic literature. Certain calamitous events in Jewish history, such as the destruction of European communities during the Crusades, also encouraged the composition of poems that are recited on certain days. Current realities find their way into the liturgy as well. Most diaspora—communities, including those of the United States today—publicly recite prayers asking for God’s guidance and protection of

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the officers of government. In certain lands and regimes, this was also the prudent thing to do. Many synagogues today include prayers on behalf of the State of Israel, thereby reaffirming the link between religion and peoplehood in Judaism.

Rabbinic Judaism considered prayer to be a public expression of religious fealty. Almost all prayers (such as the *Amidah*) are recited in the plural form.

Public prayer requires a quorum of 10 (know as a *minyan*). Orthodox Jews count 10 males. Conservative and Reform stress egalitarianism. Any 10 people can constitute a quorum. No rabbinic or priestly officials are required for prayer itself. Today, synagogues are recognized as the main setting for prayer. This was not the case in many of the earliest synagogues of antiquity. There is no explicit mention of synagogues anywhere in the Hebrew Bible. Synagogues appear for the first time, in Judaea and the diaspora, during the Second Temple period. The major function of the synagogue before 70 C.E. was for public reading of the Torah and its exposition through the delivery of a sermon. The New Testament describes both Jesus and Paul delivering sermons in synagogues. The Torah is read regularly in the synagogue as part of the service. Larger portions are read on Sabbath and holidays, while on two weekday mornings, shorter readings take place. The complete Torah is read in the course of one year. Prayer, Torah reading, and a sermon are the core of synagogue service in many synagogues today. The first two are required, but the sermon is not.



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Jews read portions of the Torah as part of synagogue worship, completing a full pass through with each year. The final portion is read on the final day of one year, which is also the beginning of the next, which creates a neverending cycle.

There is no required architecture for a synagogue. In principle, a synagogue service can be conducted anywhere, even in a private house. Certain

common characteristics nevertheless appear in most synagogues. The scrolls of the Torah are usually deposited in an ark, which stands at the front of the hall. Prayers are usually recited while facing that direction, but religious law actually mandates facing toward Jerusalem. Orthodox synagogues have separate seating for men and women, while Conservative and Reform synagogues have done away with such separation. Ancient synagogues were frequently designed in the manner of the public buildings of the surrounding culture. For much of Jewish history during the past 2,000 years, the synagogue served as its most recognizable symbol. Not surprisingly, it was also the first structure singled out for destruction in times of persecution. ■

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Hammer, Reuven. *Entering Jewish Prayer*. New York: Schocken, 1994.

Supplemental Reading

Elbogen, Ismar. *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1993.

Questions to Consider

1. Why are almost all prayers, such as the *Amidah*, recited in the plural form, not as the personal prayer of the petitioner?
2. If you have a Bible, read Deuteronomy, chapters 6 (verses 4–9) and 11 (verses 13–21), which are the first two chapters that make up the *Shma* prayer. What are the different stresses in these two chapters, and do they complement each other?

The Calendar—A Communal Life-Cycle

Lecture 6

Judaism today has a fixed calendar that determines all holidays and is arguably the most important unifying factor in what is otherwise a frequently fragmented religious community.

The basic characteristic of the Jewish calendar is its system for reckoning time, a system commonly described as *lunisolar*. The months of the Jewish calendar are lunar, and each new month is determined by the renewed conjunction of the moon with the sun. A lunar year, meaning 12 lunar months, extends to approximately 354 days. A solar year, which determines our seasons, lasts for approximately 365 days. The 11-day differential is crucial. The holidays of the yearly Jewish cycle commemorate, among other things, the seasons and agricultural status of the fields. For example, Passover is, by biblical definition, a spring festival. If the yearly cycle were determined only by the counting of 12 lunar months, Passover would slowly creep back from spring into winter. Hypothetically, it would fall on April 1 one year, March 19 the next, and so on. Because the Muslim calendar is, in fact, solely a lunar one, that movement through the solar year is precisely what happens to Ramadan.

The problem of the Jewish calendar was solved by adding a 13th month every few years, thereby pushing Passover back into the spring. In ancient times, the decision to proclaim such a leap year was taken by recognized authorities. The problem was that different bodies or persons often claimed that authority, thus leading to some major clashes in the world Jewish community. In the fourth century C.E., pressure was placed by the new Christian Empire on the apparatus used by the Jewish community to inform all diaspora Jews of the decision to proclaim a leap year. This was done to effect a separation of the festival of Easter from reliance on the Jewish calculations for determining the date of Passover.

All the above ultimately led to the fixing of a Jewish calendar that would not be based on ad hoc decisions but, instead, calculated in advance. With the

acceptance of this calculation, traditionally attributed to the Jewish patriarch of 4th-century Palestine, all of Judaism was committed to one recognized calendar. In a normal year, there are 12 months. Leap years have 13; the names of the months are Babylonian and are universally accepted by all Jews. Jewish holidays are celebrated on specific days of the lunar month. Thus, Passover is on the 15th of Nisan; the New Year (Rosh ha-Shana), on the 1st and 2nd of Tishri; the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), on the 10th of Tishri; and so on.

The one holy day in Judaism that is not determined by a particular date of the year is the Sabbath (Hebrew: *shabbat*—“to rest”). For many, it is the crown jewel of the Jewish time cycle. Sabbath is the only sacred day mentioned in

the Ten Commandments. The reason given in Exodus 20:11 for ceasing all work on Sabbath is that God, after creating the world in six days, rested on the seventh day. The second version of the Ten Commandments, in Deuteronomy 5:14–15, places greater stress on social grounds: all

The Sabbath, like all days in the Jewish calendar, begins at sunset and continues until evening of the following day.

should have a day of rest, even “that your male and female slave rest as you do.” That text also reminds Israel that they, too, were once slaves, until freed by God. The Sabbath, like all days in the Jewish calendar, begins at sunset and continues until evening of the following day.

The holidays fall into a number of categories. The most solemn, known as the High Holy Days (or Days of Awe), are the New Year and the Day of Atonement. Both fall in Tishri, which is just as summer is about to end and autumn begins (usually in September). The New Year (Rosh ha-Shana) is considered the yearly day of judgment. The main theme projects God as king and judge of all mankind. Although Rosh ha-Shanah is a Jewish holiday, there is a definite universal aspect to this day. Along with extended prayer, the most outstanding element of the service is the blowing of the ram’s horn (any horn of a kosher animal would do, but the ram invokes the memory of the animal that took Isaac’s place as Abraham’s sacrifice on Mount Moriah [Gen. 22]—an event that is given much attention on this day). The blowing of the horn (Hebrew: *shofar*) is based on Scripture, but medieval Jewish

scholars considered it a wake-up call, arousing mankind from its moral slumber. Ten days are counted from Rosh ha-Shana to Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), and these are designated as the days of repentance. This period of personal introspection reaches its peak on Yom Kippur. A day of total fasting, Jews spend the greater part of the day in prayer.

A second category of holidays is seasonal, signifying the agricultural activity of autumn and spring. But all three of these holidays also bear close associations with chapters of the biblical Exodus story. The first of these, *Sukkot* (“Tabernacles”) comes just five days after Yom Kippur and is commonly connected to the Israelites’ dwelling in makeshift booths as they traversed the desert. The final day of the holiday marks the move into the coming winter, and a special prayer for rain is recited. On this same eighth day in Israel (but on a ninth day in most diaspora communities), a special joyous day is added, commemorating the end (and the beginning) of the yearly cycle of Torah reading.

Six months later, the festival of Passover is celebrated. The first night is the most extraordinary one of the year, because it is then that the Seder takes place. Not an ordinary festive dinner, even the food is intended to conjure up memories of bondage in Egypt and miraculous redemption. A text known as the *Haggadah* is read, recounting the Exodus story through the recitation of biblical Scripture, rabbinic accounts, and later medieval poetry.

Exactly seven weeks after the beginning of Passover (which is also celebrated for a week), the festival of Pentecost, or *Shavu'ot* (literally, “weeks”) is held. Although biblically linked to yet another agricultural feast, this day was



Jews light candles in a menorah on Hannukah, a holiday that lasts for eight days.

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determined by rabbis to commemorate the revelation at Sinai and giving of the Torah.

A third category of festivals was added in Second Temple times. The feast of Purim, based on the events of the biblical Book of Esther, is celebrated a month before Passover. The nature of the story, about an evil official in the Persian kingdom who attempted to annihilate all the Jews of the realm, only to be thwarted, resonates deeply with Jews today, as it must have during certain earlier stages of history. The other feast, this one lasting eight days, is Hannukah. Celebrated in December, it focuses on the cultural clash between Judaism and Hellenism.

Judaism remembers the sad events of its history as well, and numerous fast days commemorate the destruction of the two Jewish Temples as part of a long list of disasters that mark the saga of the Jews. The most solemn of these days is the Ninth of Av, usually coinciding with late July or early August. A day of fasting, it commemorates not only the destruction of both Temples but a series of other misfortunes, as well.

All these dates have been part of Judaism's calendar for centuries and are universally recognized by all segments of the community. Events of the last few generations have aroused calls for an updating of the calendar, and numerous special days have been added. Israel's Day of Independence is celebrated not only in the State of Israel but by Jews who identify with it abroad, as well. One week after Passover, the tragic events of the Holocaust are remembered on the anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. ■

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Goldman, Ari L. *Being Jewish*, Book Two: *The Jewish Year*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000.

Supplemental Reading

Greenberg, Irving. *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays*. New York: Summit, 1988.

Questions to Consider

1. The various Jewish denominations today differ in almost every aspect of Judaism except the calendar. Why is this so?
2. Many of the Jewish holidays are celebrated—especially in Israel—by completely secular Jews. What does this say about the nature of Judaism?

Individual Life-Cycles

Lecture 7

Although holidays are fixed days of the year, Judaism finds its expression throughout the year, at all major stages of an individual's life.

The first commandment in the Hebrew Bible, according to Judaism, was to be "fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:28; 9:1), and the very moment of birth ushers in a life-cycle with an enormous range of religious significance. Marriage is recognized in Judaism as being a source of "joy, gladness, mirth, exultation, pleasure, delight, love and peace" (this list actually appears in one of the blessings recited at the marriage ceremony). Procreation was, nevertheless, the main goal of marriage. Judaism rarely encouraged celibacy, because that would preclude performance of the "first" of God's commandments.

The birth of a child sets into motion a series of religious observances. Following the model of Abraham's covenant by circumcision (Gen. 17:9–13), all males are circumcised. The preferred age for circumcision is eight days old. If the baby is not entirely healthy (jaundice is a common problem), the ceremony may be postponed as long as necessary (this is determined by a doctor, not a rabbi). An adult Jew who was not circumcised as a child (this was the case with many Jews in the former Soviet Union) is required to have himself circumcised. As the preeminent rite of entry into Jewish life, converts are required to circumcise.

All sorts of rationalizations for this ritual have been put forward, from claims of a hygienic nature to the moderation of sexual desire. Rabbinic Judaism usually kept a distance from this type of rationalization. In the early stages of Reform Judaism (19th -century Germany), opposition was expressed, as part of a general distaste for particularistic behavior by Jews. The fact that the practice distinguished between the sexes also contributed to some opposition. Today, circumcision is almost universal among all branches of Judaism. Circumcision was historically considered the ultimate physical

mark of a Jew, and various persecutions often involved identifying Jewish males through this sign.

The next rite of passage for all Jewish children is the coming of age, that is, assuming all the obligations of an adult. Girls are formally considered of age, and required to keep all the religious laws incumbent on women, at 12. For boys, the age is 13. On reaching these ages, children are required to keep *mitzvot* (commandments). Hence, a boy is referred to as *bar mitzva* (literally, “son of commandment” but, in essence, “belonging to *mitzvot*”); a girl is *bat mitzva* (“daughter,” or “belonging to *mitzvot*”). Historically, the reaching of majority was not a cause for extraordinary celebration. Today’s lavish festivities are a more recent development, with boys being feted thanks to the more outward manifestations of their entering adulthood.

The most obvious of these was the wearing of *tefillin* (see Glossary) at morning prayers. Moreover, at 13, boys could take an active part in all synagogue rituals, whereas women were precluded from actively participating in them. Sensitivity toward sexual equality has led both Reform and Conservative communities to level the religious playing field for girls, and *bat mitzva* ceremonies are now common in these synagogues. Orthodox Jews who wish to celebrate a *bat mitzva* will usually do so in a manner unconnected to synagogue ritual.

A more informal rite of passage, but no less significant than the technical reaching of majority, is the introduction of children into the education process. Study of Torah was historically considered one of the central religious obligations of Jews. One of the upheavals of Jewish norms in recent years has been the growing involvement of women in higher levels of traditional education. Even among ever-growing Orthodox circles, women are now regularly introduced to the entire corpus of Judaic learning, something almost unheard of just a few generations ago.

In Judaism, marriage is the normal and highly preferable state of life for adults. The imagery of God’s love for Israel was commonly compared to marital relations, and the rabbis frequently refer to God’s presence in a good marriage, sort of a third partner. Today, Judaism is monogamous, although nothing in the Bible or later law actually forbade men from having more

than one wife. A decree issued by one of the leaders of the Ashkenazi (Western European) Jewish world some 1,000 years ago banned polygamy for Ashkenazim, but this is now common practice among all Jews.

In ancient times, the marriage process took place in stages, but today, these are all performed at the same time. The first stage of marriage was the betrothal (*kiddushin*), at which time the groom gave the bride an object of

The birth of a child sets into motion a series of religious observances.

specific value (today, a ring) in front of two witnesses and declared that with this object “you are betrothed to me.” The second stage (in antiquity, this might be months later) has the groom write up and sign a *ketubah*, that is, a marriage document, which

is primarily a commitment to pay the wife a specific sum if he should divorce her in the future. Knowledge of this pledge would, it was hoped, prevent divorce on impulse or in moments of anger. Betrothal and marriage are today performed together at the wedding.

After the *ketubah* is signed, the couple enters under a canopy (*huppah*), symbolizing the house into which the bride is being introduced. A number of benedictions are recited, one over a cup of wine from which both husband and wife sip. The groom performs the *kiddushin* ceremony by giving the bride a ring, reciting, “Behold you are consecrated to me with this ring in accordance with the law of Moses and Israel”; the *ketubah* is read; wine is sipped again; and a glass is crushed under foot by the groom. This last act is commonly assumed to be in remembrance of the destruction of Jerusalem—an event not lost on Jews even at the height of joy.

The fact that the groom writes a *ketubah* is only part of an asymmetric relationship between husband and wife in historical Judaism. It was the husband’s prerogative to divorce his wife, but the wife could not equally divorce her husband. Judaism considers divorce to be an act taken by the parties involved and does not require a court’s ratification. As such, it is primarily an act of mutual consent, although the initiative originally was the husband’s. A husband must give the divorce document (Hebrew: *get*) of his own free will, and the woman must receive it of her own free will. Over the

centuries, steps were taken to grant greater leverage to the wife. She can petition a court to force her husband to divorce her, based on a variety of claims, such as the husband's improper behavior toward her. When a husband refuses to grant his wife a divorce, and the court believes the wife's claims to be justified, it can enforce all sorts of coercion (even jail) to pressure the husband to grant a divorce.

Preservation of life is supreme in Judaism, and all religious laws are abrogated to keep a person alive. When death occurs, a detailed system of burial and mourning sets in. Ideally, a dying person should recite the *Shma* and confess his or her sins. The corpse is cleaned and dressed in plain white shrouds; men frequently have their prayer shawls (Hebrew: *tallit*) placed on them. Burial in the ground is, traditionally, the only system countenanced.

After burial, a series of mourning periods commences. The first lasts for seven days (hence the phrase *shiva*—“seven” in Hebrew). Mourners refrain from everyday activities, usually remain at home, and receive condolence visits there. It is customary to conduct daily payers at a mourner's house. The second stage lasts for 30 days, when mourning ends for all except the immediate offspring of the dead. They maintain a third stage for one full year. During the first year (actually 11 months) after death, and on the anniversary of the death, a prayer known as *Kaddish* (Aramaic: “sanctification”) is recited by the children of the deceased. This prayer contains a detailed litany of praise describing God's kingdom in this world and originally was recited at the end of prayers and study sessions. Beginning in medieval Germany, it was assigned to be recited by mourners, and it is common for nontraditional Jews to nevertheless be meticulous in reciting *Kaddish* during their year of mourning. ■

Essential Reading

Goldman, Ari L. *Being Jewish: The Spiritual and Cultural Practice of Judaism Today*, Book One: *The Jewish Life*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000.

Supplemental Reading

Wouk, Herman. *This Is My God*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1959, chapters 10–12.

Questions to Consider

1. Why are even totally nontraditional Jews so particular about reciting *Kaddish* following the death of parents?
2. Why is circumcision still practiced even by Jews who consider so many other biblical requirements to no longer be binding?

God and Man; God and Community

Lecture 8

As with so many other aspects of Judaism, even the basic perception of the deity, as well as the nature of God's relationship to man, cannot be reduced to one all-embracing, mandatory, and universally accepted creed.

The Bible does not set out to prove there is a God. The story of creation is not presented as proof of God, but describes God's initial role and relationship with our world. Even in the polytheistic environment of antiquity, theoretical atheism does not appear to have been an option. Only with the sort of abstract contemplation introduced by the Greeks did challenges regarding the existence of a God become significant. In the early Middle Ages, Islam and Christianity were exposed to these Greek questions and frequently served as conduits to Jewish thinkers. The latter now began to search for philosophical formulations of what Judaism believes.

Although God's existence was not in doubt, his role in man's life, and in the life of the people of Israel, was an issue for Jews in the ancient world. The biblical account of creation obviously assumes a potent or powerful God. Israel was constantly reminded of God's power—and benevolence—as justifying reverence to Him alone (to the exception of all other gods). The opening line of the Ten Commandments stresses that God brought Israel out of Egypt—a manifestation of power and love at the same time—and, therefore, “you shall have no other Gods.” The Bible also assumes an ongoing relationship between God and mankind: If people are rewarded for good deeds and punished for bad ones, someone must be keeping score.

By post-biblical times, these simple issues lost some of their simplicity. During the last centuries B.C.E., Judaism seems to have experienced a certain diversification, and different groups, with widely varying beliefs regarding God's role in this world, appeared on the scene. Sources describe at least three different groups (“philosophies” in the Greek, used by the Jewish historian Josephus) on the scene in the last centuries B.C.E.: One group, the Sadducees, believed in a God that was totally removed from any

active involvement in this world. This same group also denied any form of resurrection of the dead or any human existence after death. A second group, known as Essenes (often associated with the Dead Sea Scrolls), claimed that everything was preordained by God; man really has no choice or free will to act as he wishes. The third group, known as Pharisees, believed that everything that transpires is the will of God; nevertheless, man has free will to choose evil or good. This approach was destined to be embraced by most mainstream Jewish thinkers. The rabbis of the Talmud would put it thus: "All is in the hands of Heaven [God] save the fear of Heaven."

The understanding of the nature of reward and punishment also seems to have caused problems for Jewish thinkers. Biblical books, particularly Job, realize that the righteous frequently suffer while the wicked thrive. By Second Temple times, this seems to have been partially resolved by assigning much of man's reward to a future existence, or "the world to come." The Sadducees probably found no overt allusion to this in the Bible and, thus, denied the idea. By the Middle Ages, Jewish philosophers, such as Maimonides, not only considered a belief in reward and punishment to be a major article of faith, but had no doubts that such rewards are primarily connected to a future existence. Some medieval and modern thinkers nevertheless had problems with this doctrine of reward and punishment: God appears to be vindictive; how can the suffering of children be justified by the sins of their parents? Some modern writers have attempted to solve these issues by quoting rabbinic statements that seem to suggest that good deeds are their own reward.

The notion of "resurrection," although one of the mainstays of traditional Jewish belief, was also far from clear throughout Jewish history. Some biblical passages allude to the dead arising (Isa. 26:19; Dan. 12:2). Post-biblical literature was not clear about how this will occur, but it does not appear to be an individual phenomenon; it seems to be, rather, a communal, or national, future event. The ongoing existence of the soul, on the other hand, seems to have been understood on an individual basis. By medieval times, there apparently were some disputes about the corporeal or spiritual sense of resurrection.

In terms of sequence, there was one major reward that was to come after the removal of the soul from the body upon death, but before the ultimate resurrection. This was the appearance of a messiah. The idea of a messiah has wielded an enormous influence on much of Jewish history, but the nature of this belief was constantly in flux. The word *messiah* comes from the Hebrew word “to anoint.” At some point in time, this was understood to allude not merely to the existing historical dynasty, but to a future heir to the Davidic throne.

The nature of the future reestablishment of a son of David was alternatively interpreted to mean different things. At times, the emphasis is more restorative, that is, a return to the old glory of Israel. At other times, the stress is more on a utopian vision of the future. The restorative vision is far more Judaic-centered, whereas the futuristic utopian image would appear to be far more universal, encompassing all the nations. In the restorative account, the process was apparently this-worldly, that is, taking place in a world whose laws of nature are those of our own world. The utopian image suggests a total revision of the laws of nature, where animals that are natural enemies would become friendly neighbors. These two visions did not always alternate and replace one another but probably coexisted among different elements of Jewish society.

Although God's existence was not in doubt, his role in man's life, and in the life of the people of Israel, was an issue for Jews in the ancient world.

But history did play a determining role. The last military attempt at removing Roman rule from Palestine occurred during the uprising of a military leader called Bar-Koziba (132–135 C.E.). Bar Koziba (frequently called Bar Kokhba) appears to have had messianic aspirations and was actually described as such in rabbinic literature. With Bar Koziba's failure, the pendulum of messianic thought seems to have swung to the other extreme, and a distinct process of “spiritualization” in messianic hopes took over. By the 12th century, Maimonides could categorically state that the Messianic Age was not about politics, but would be a period enabling the unfettered study of Torah in preparation for the coming world. Many would argue that the appearance of Zionism was itself a result of messianic aspirations. On

the one hand, these hopes refocused on a national restoration, but on the other hand, the nature of this restoration was radically secularized. ■

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Jacobs, Louis. *A Jewish Theology*. West Orange, NJ: Behrman House, 1973.

Supplemental Reading

Green, Arthur, ed. *Jewish Spirituality*. Vol. 1, New York: Crossroad, 1987; vol. 2, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987.

Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *God in Search of Man*. New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1956.

Scholem, Gershom. *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*. New York: Schocken, 1972.

Questions to Consider

1. Do the two types of messianic imagery described in this lecture suggest one of the differences between Judaism and Christianity?
2. How do you think people have tried to reconcile God's omniscience (knowledge and even pre-knowledge of everything) and the belief in man's free will?

Philosophers and Mystics

Lecture 9

Throughout history, Jewish thinkers addressed the nature of their religion, and frequently, this search was the result of a perceived need to confront other intellectual or religious groups.

Greek philosophy introduced a revolutionary way of thinking about the world. It represented a challenge to Judaism at diverse times and places. Philosophers (Greek: “lovers of wisdom”) investigated the nature of things, hoping to arrive at new truths that would explain the order of the world, the nature of change, and even aspects of the human soul. Jews, both in antiquity and the Middle Ages, believed that they possessed these truths as part of their religious tradition. Nevertheless, the abstract and conceptual nature of Greek thinking had an enormous effect on the Greco-Roman world, and at least some Jews, having themselves adopted aspects of these thought processes, now turned them inward toward a reexamination of their own inherited traditions. Apologetics, or a need to rationalize their laws and beliefs in the light of Greek thought, may have played a serious role, as well.

The first great Jewish philosopher was Philo, an observant Jew living in Alexandria in the 1st century C.E. Philo tried to reconcile his Greek philosophical training with his comprehensive knowledge of Jewish religious tradition, based primarily on the Bible (which he read for the most part in Greek translation; his Hebrew was rudimentary at best). Much of Philo’s writings are in the form of a commentary to the Bible, but he used an allegorical approach as a means of presenting the laws and stories with far deeper meanings than would appear at face value. Rabbinic Judaism frowned on such exercises, for obvious reasons. If there is a deeper meaning to be uncovered in the text and things are not quite as they appear, are the practical, face-value imperatives still valid once the inner meaning has been deciphered? The potential for doing away with the practical keeping of religious laws was obvious, and although Philo did not draw this practical conclusion, it is not surprising that it was the Church, not the rabbis, that preserved his writings.

The second major Jewish philosopher appeared in Iraq in the 10th century. This was Sa'adya Gaon (882–942), head of the Sura rabbinic academy (Gaon was the title of the academic heads in Jewish Babylonia). Sa'adya found Judaism challenged on two fronts. Karaism, a spinoff from Judaism, had raised serious challenges to the authority of rabbinic Judaism, claiming loyalty to the Bible alone. Some Karaites, however, went further by raising questions regarding the role of God in creation and suggested a mediation of angels. God, some thought, was too removed from this world to have been actively involved (thus possibly conjuring up ancient Sadducean teaching). The other challenge was the discovery by Arab thinkers of Greek philosophical discourse and their application of rational thought processes in the examination of religious truths. This scholastic theology, known as *Kalam*, serves as the background for Sa'adya's major philosophical work, *Emunot ve-Deot* (*Beliefs and Opinions*).

The book was written in Arabic and translated later into Hebrew. It is the first rational or philosophical defense of Judaism and, in many ways, the earliest example of a systematic Jewish theology. Sa'adya distinguished between those beliefs that are the fruits of rational thinking and reason and those that are transmitted through revelation. For Sa'adya, these two, rather than being mutually exclusive, are complementary. In his attempt to prove God's creation of the world through rational deduction, Sa'adya was responding directly to fears that rational argumentation would challenge faith.

Greek philosophy, mediated by Arab authors, rapidly spread, and Jews well versed in this scholarship felt the need to reply. The greatest of these, and arguably the greatest thinker in all of Jewish history, was Maimonides. Maimonides was born in Cordoba, Spain, in 1135 and died in Fostat (the old city of Cairo, Egypt) in 1204. Not only a great philosopher, Maimonides was also one of the outstanding rabbinic legal scholars in all of Jewish history. His masterwork in this field was a codification of all of Jewish law in 14 books, known as *Mishneh Torah* ("Repetition of the Torah"). His genius here was in going through all previous rabbinic literature and thematically organizing it.

As a philosopher, Maimonides is best known for his work *The Guide of the Perplexed*. His philosophic training came to him through Arabic authors

who were trained in Aristotelian philosophy, which became the basis for Maimonides, as well. His intended readership were Jews who, although well versed in their religious tradition, were also exposed to rational thought and, consequently, had difficulty with major portions of the Bible, in particular, the various anthropomorphic allusions to God. This led Maimonides to ascribe a spiritualized meaning to many of the biblical descriptions of God. From here, it was not far to an attempt at defining what we can and cannot know about God. How can God be one, yet have so many attributes? The essence of God's unity and existence has a major part in the thinking of Maimonides.

Rational, philosophic approaches to Judaism were not the only paths taken by Jews over the centuries. For some, a religious experience might be achieved not through legal and philosophical contemplation, but through activities that seek a more immediate communion with God. Mystical endeavors at achieving a closeness and intimate knowledge of God go back to the beginnings of the first millennium. Based on the image of a four-wheeled chariot in the opening visions of the prophet Ezekiel, a whole literature developed around those who attempted, using all sorts of techniques, to spiritually ascend to the heavens and witness the Divine Throne. These people are known as "descenders of the chariot." The most famous system of mystical contemplation is known as *Kabbalah*, Hebrew for "tradition." Rabbis used the term to describe the legal tradition going back to Moses, but mystics co-opted it to suggest a more hidden tradition passed on to worthy initiates. *Kabbalah* addresses the nature of the deity, distinguishing between God as he is and God as he manifests himself in this world. The essential God is unknowable (in Hebrew: *en sof*,



Great 12th-century Jewish philosopher Maimonides drew on his knowledge of philosophy and science in developing the *Mishneh Torah*.

Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-15246.

“limitless”), but his manifestations descend to us through a series of powers from within the Godhead. These 10 powers are known as *sefirot*. They serve as a sort of bridge between the *en sof* and our imperfect reality.

The classic Kabbalistic text is the *Zohar* (“Radiance”), which resembles a commentary to the Torah in Aramaic. It originally appeared in 13th-century Spain, although traditionalists would claim it goes back to Galilean rabbis of the second century C.E. With its printing in the 16th century, the *Zohar* became an extremely influential work, although many Kabbalists thought its dissemination among the masses was dangerous. Kabbalistic teachings received a further stimulation through the teaching and influence of Isaac ben Solomon Luria (known as “the Ari”), who spent his final years in 16th-century Safed. Luria introduced new ideas, primarily connected to the nature of the cosmos. God, he claimed, had withdrawn into the *en sof*, leaving a void out of which “primordial man” and the *sefirot* were created. An ongoing process of withdrawal and emanation now took on practical implications; these were connected with Israel’s vicissitudes in this world, going from exile to redemption.

In the aftermath of the Jewish expulsion from Spain in 1492, many Jews were primed for the reception of mystical explanations of their recent catastrophe, as well as the concomitant hopes for imminent redemption. The spread of Kabbalah had major social repercussions among the Jewish communities. Kabbalah offered an alternative system of spirituality, alongside the traditional commitment to rabbinic studies. This alternative later encouraged the appearance of alternative communal contexts as well, most notably, the emergence of Hasidism. This movement based its notion of God’s pervasiveness on Kabbalistic teachings; its practical results were a far greater stress on prayer and aspects of daily behavior than on traditional learning. Some scholars have also drawn connections between the political ramifications of Lurianic Kabbalah and the appearance of false messianic movements, most notably that of Shabetai Zevi in the 17th century. ■

Kabbalah offered an alternative system of spirituality, alongside the traditional commitment to rabbinic studies.

Essential Reading

Sirat, Colette. *A History of Jewish Philosophies in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

Supplemental Reading

Idel, Moshe. *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984.

Questions to Consider

1. Nineteenth-century Jewish historians had little love for Kabbalah and considered Maimonides (and even Philo) to be early models for Jewish intellectual activity. Why was this so?
2. Why do you think some Jewish contemporaries of Maimonides opposed him and tried to ban his writings?

The Legal Frameworks of Judaism—*Halakha*

Lecture 10

Judaism comprises far more than a faith or system of beliefs. It is, in essence, a way of life that embraces its adherents literally from morning to night, with a detailed legal system claiming its roots and legitimacy in biblical law.

Rabbinic Judaism divided all of Jewish tradition into two components: *Halakha* and *Aggada*. *Halakha* (literally, “to walk”) relates to the legal component of Jewish tradition in the broadest possible sense. It encompasses all behavioral aspects of Jewish life. *Aggada* (literally, “discourse; telling”) can only be accurately defined as everything that is not *Halakha*. This includes all the folklore of rabbinic literature; its allusions to history and medicine; tales of the sages; and in a sense, the ethical statements found throughout rabbinic literature. In the latter case, however, one might consider practical imperatives deriving from those statements as akin to halakhic requirements.

The legal system of Judaism, the *Halakha*, considers its roots and divine authority to derive directly from the written Bible. The rabbis were sufficiently sophisticated to realize that not every word or decision formulated in their circles of study was actually transmitted verbatim to Moses. The rabbis also realized that not all of their traditions, and certainly not all of their own decisions, find explicit support in Scripture. Ultimately, they would distinguish between laws that are “from the Torah” and those “from the rabbis.” Although a certain leniency was often evinced toward the latter, this did not undermine the overall premise that the mass of oral tradition was nevertheless divinely mandated and absolutely binding. The legal premise for this understanding was that revelation happened only once, at Sinai, and it was there that Israel was commanded to accept the decisions of all subsequent judges or teachers. Thus, the absolute authority of rabbinic teaching went hand-in-hand with the negation of any role for revelation following Sinai. Prophets were deemed the transmitters of God’s ethical instruction (or displeasure) but never the means for additional legal

instruction. A prophet may not add a *halakha* (the singular form for a legal stipulation), nor may he abrogate one.

The sages were also aware of new realities requiring attention, even if there was no obvious allusion to these problems in the written Torah. Procedures taken by legal authorities as a corrective to some new development appear

frequently in rabbinic tradition. They would usually be imposed to alleviate some unforeseen hardship. In certain cases, rabbis would also impose restrictions not necessarily found in the Scriptures. In a previous discussion, we alluded to the medieval rabbinic prohibition of bigamy. Inasmuch as this was not strictly a halakhic decree (which would then be binding on all Jews) but the instruction of a particular

Throughout history, groups that could not accept the absolute authority of this legal tradition found themselves marginalized and, ultimately, beyond the pale of organized Jewish life.

rabbinic authority (Rabbenu Gershom of Mainz; 960–1028) recognized by Ashkenazi Jews, the decree was binding only on them but not on Sephardic Jews.

Oral tradition was ultimately put in literary form, and this paved the way for the formal codification of Halakha. The first systematic compilation of Halakha, arranged thematically, was the Mishna, completed around 220 C.E. The Mishna itself was then closely studied for centuries both in Palestine and Babylonia. This process resulted in the appearance of the two Talmuds: the Palestinian (or Jerusalem) Talmud was completed some time in the late 4th century C.E., and the Babylonian Talmud, sometime between 500–600 C.E. As we noted in Lecture Three, the Talmuds are not codes of law, but extremely broad discussions of the Mishna alongside a wealth of non-legal (aggadic) material.

Only in the Middle Ages do we find the Halakha systematically codified and including, not only the Mishna, but all the subsequent deliberations that evolved from that work. Added to these were the thousands of individual

decisions issued by rabbis in response to particular questions posed directly to them, commonly referred to as *responsa*. Numerous legal codes were produced. The most influential were:

- Maimonides's *Mishneh Torah* (12th century C.E.), which covers in 14 books all the components of Jewish law. Interestingly, he included not only the laws pertaining to a post-Temple reality, but also all the regulations of Temple worship, such as the sacrifices. Scholars have speculated about what this tells us about his hopes for a messianic restoration. Interestingly, most of the other medieval codes did not include these regulations.
- The *Four Rows* (*Turim* in Hebrew) were produced by the German halakhic sage Rabbi Jacob ben Asher (14th century C.E.). The name of the work is based on his division of all the legal components of Judaism into four categories: prayer and festivals, dietary laws, family law, and civil law. The *Tur*, printed in Italy in 1475, was one of the very first Hebrew books to be printed.
- R. Joseph Karo (1488–1575), one of the Jews exiled from Spain and who later settled in Safed, wrote a major code based on the *Tur*, which he called *Bet Yosef* ("The House of Joseph"). *Bet Yosef* was his real masterpiece, but he later wrote a digest based on it, called the *Shulkhan Arukh* ("Arranged Table"), and this work, first published in 1565, became the definitive statement of Jewish law.

Until the 18th century, the premise among all adherents to Judaism was that acceptance of the Halakha was the ultimate sign of proper Jewish behavior. Throughout history, groups that could not accept the absolute authority of this legal tradition found themselves marginalized and, ultimately, beyond the pale of organized Jewish life. The most noted example of such a process was the Karaite schism. The 18th-century Enlightenment movement (*Haskalah* in Hebrew) introduced Jewish society, at first in Germany, then elsewhere in Europe, to the new ideas of a modern secular world into which Jews might enter for the first time. Many participants in this movement considered

themselves spiritual descendants of Maimonides, also trying to reconcile between two cultural environments.

In the 19th century in Germany, this process led to the appearance of Reform Judaism. Adherence to Halakha as the standard for Jewish behavior was now questioned for the first time. Modern biblical scholarship also took its toll. Questions surrounding the authorship of the Torah had a direct influence on how some Jews now understood the divine authority of Halakha, which had always looked to the Bible as its ultimate source. Although Orthodox Jewry continued to accept Halakha as absolutely binding and based on revelation and an ongoing chain of tradition, other groups in the community redefined their attitudes toward the role of Halakha in future Jewish life. Conservative Judaism also accepts the binding nature of Jewish law, but qualifies this by stressing the ongoing historical development of that law and the frequent need to reconcile it with new realities. Reform Judaism, while stressing the central role of prophetic ethical teaching, does not consider the Halakha in its historical frameworks to be binding. It is one of many expressions of the Jewish spirit but certainly cannot be accepted in its “frozen” state. ■

Essential Reading

Dorff, Elliot N., and Rosett, Arthur. *A Living Tree: The Roots and Growth of Jewish Law*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1988.

Supplemental Reading

Jacobs, Louis. *A Tree of Life: Diversity, Flexibility and Creativity in Jewish Law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984.

Questions to Consider

1. Is the debate among the various denominations about the role and authority of Halakha different from earlier religious divisions in the history of Judaism?

2. Why is the principle of a “chain of tradition” so important for the espousers of Halakha?

Common Judaism—or a Plurality of Judaisms?

Lecture 11

With the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, we have now been provided with firsthand knowledge of the diversity of opinions on what is Judaism; varying opinions that existed fully two thousand years ago.

There is no formal body or organization that represents all of Judaism today. Nor is there any authoritative body or person whose decisions are binding on all the adherents to Judaism. This is not quite what the Bible seems to have had in mind. Deuteronomy 17:8–13 describes hypothetical problems that can't be solved locally. The interested parties are required to “go to the place that the Lord will have chosen,” and there, they will receive a decision from priests or magistrates. If a person disregarded the instructions coming from that center, he was to be executed. The unifying factor in the First Temple period was the monarchy, but after the death of Solomon, the monarchy itself was split into two competing kingdoms.

The Second Temple period was characterized by a plurality of Jewish groups, each interpreting their Judaism differently. Beyond the triple division of Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes described by Josephus, we now possess the Dead Sea Scrolls, which suggest divisions even within some of these groups. Josephus also describes different types of Pharisees. During the Second Temple period, there was an institution in Jerusalem known as the Sanhedrin. Subsequent rabbinic sources imagined an ideal reality in which, as in biblical fashion, all matters of legal or religious importance were decided there. Historically, this does not seem to have been the case. The Sanhedrin itself was not a monolithic body, but included members possessing vastly different notions of what constituted “Judaism” (such as Pharisees and Sadducees).

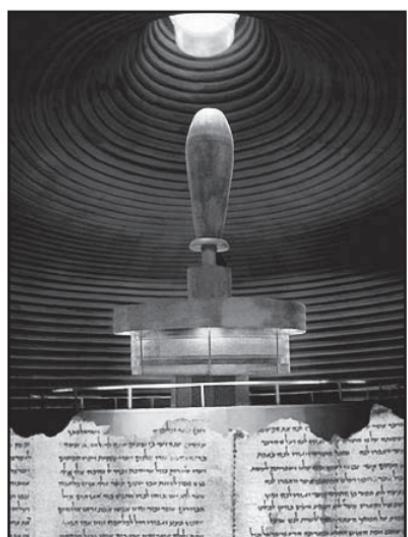
Post-Temple Judaism is frequently projected as having established a more “normative” Jewish community and leadership, but this, too, must be qualified. Rabbinic legal literature from this period (such as the Mishnah) is

noteworthy for retaining varying opinions on almost every aspect of Jewish law and religion. The Mishnah actually justifies the preservation of minority opinions so that they might be used by subsequent courts. The rabbinic world of Judaism was far from monolithic, and throughout the period of the Talmud, there were endless disagreements between the rabbis of Palestine and those of Babylonia. The Talmud does not consider this reality harmful, and it was accepted that each community lived in accordance with its own customs and legal decisions.

Only in the Geonic period, and beginning in the 9th century, do we encounter attempts by the rabbinic establishment of Babylonia to impose

its opinions on the vast majority of Jewish communities throughout the diaspora, by negating the legitimacy and authenticity of Palestinian rabbinic legal tradition. Attempts to create a more monolithic rabbinic leadership and legal system at this time are attested by documents that were found in the Cairo *genizah*. This was probably the last time in Jewish history that a particular body of leadership, in one center, attempted to establish itself as the sole recognized authority of the entire Jewish world.

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The Dead Sea Scrolls in the Shrine of the Book, part of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

Although diversity characterized the Jewish world in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, there appear to have been limits even to this openness. One group of Jews

that slowly found themselves outside the framework of the community were those that accepted a belief in Jesus. The Judaeo-Christians of the first centuries C.E. also included a variety of groups. The process of distancing Judaeo-Christians took place primarily in Palestine and probably

some adjacent districts, such as Syria. In Babylonia and throughout much of the Jewish lands ruled by Islam, another group of Jews also found its ties to the main body of Judaism severed. These were the Karaites, who refused to accept the authority of the rabbis and the binding status of oral tradition.

As we have seen in earlier lectures, the Jewish world continued to allow for a wide variety of religious expression, although in certain cases, there were heated debates and even some attempts at banning opposing groups. We have already noted the vastly different approaches of the philosophers and the mystics in their interpretations and expressions of Jewish belief. And while some tried to ban the works of Maimonides and others attempted to limit popular access to the study of Kabbalah, both bodies of literature ultimately retained major positions and a legitimate status in the Jewish context.

Another late-medieval and early-modern potential for divisive fragmentation presented itself with the emergence of Hasidism. Appearing initially in Poland in the 18th century, then spreading to much of Eastern Europe, Hasidism was a sort of revivalist movement that attracted the imagination of masses of Jews. Clearly influenced by Kabbalistic ideas, Hasidism stressed alternative aspects and manifestations of Judaic worship and behavior. Rather than the earlier importance attributed to the study of Torah as an end in itself, Hasidism placed greater emphasis on ecstatic prayer, love of God, and maintenance of joy as a norm to be constantly pursued, as well as adherence to a pious rabbi (*zaddik*) who maintained extra-close relations with God. The advent of Hasidism was a direct challenge to the existing recognized order and leadership of Jewish society and was vehemently opposed by the rabbinic learned establishment, which now became known as *mitnagdim* (Hebrew for “opponents”). The Haskalah (“Jewish Enlightenment”) movement also fought Hasidism, considering it a primitive obstacle that would prevent the ultimate immersion of Jews into modern society. Notwithstanding their long-fought battles, both Hasidism and its rabbinic opponents ultimately recognized each other’s legitimacy in the Jewish fold. At times, they even joined forces against their common enemy, the *Maskilim*.

The most recent divisions in Judaism are those of the 19th and 20th centuries. Nineteenth-century realities in Western Europe, primarily in Germany, led some Jewish leaders to believe that the number of Jews would dwindle radically in light of the attractive lure of modern European society that had opened its gates to Jews as a result of emancipation. They claimed that Jewish forms and contexts for worship must be rendered more attractive; models for this were found in the dominant faith of the time. In 1818, the first Reform synagogue (now to be called a *temple*) was opened in Hamburg. Much of the (shortened) prayer was conducted in German, as was the sermon, and the service was accompanied with the playing of an organ.

Major ritual components of Judaism were gradually abandoned by early Reform, in accordance with the heightened significance attributed to the ethical teachings of the prophets at the expense of the behavioral system mandated by the Torah. Biblical scholarship of the modern period had convinced the founders of Reform that although the Bible may have been “divinely inspired,” it was the work of human beings. Stress on a national-restorative element in Judaism was abandoned, as was the belief in a personal messiah.

The radical approach of the Reform movement in Germany aroused opposition even among the ranks of some of the modernists in 19th-century Germany. One of these, Zacharias Frankel, broke ranks with the extreme reformers. Striving to preserve the frameworks and practices of historical Judaism even as it accepted the challenges of new realities and new scholarly conclusions on the ongoing development of Judaism, Frankel became head of a rabbinical seminary in Breslau in 1854. He also founded a periodical devoted to modern scholarship on all aspects of Judaism. Both these groups were vehemently opposed by the rabbinic leadership of the traditional Jewish communities. The traditionalists were branded with the title *Orthodox*, an allusion to Christian theological stringency, but ultimately, the name became commonly accepted. Orthodoxy was characterized by a strict adherence to the legal system of the Torah, all of which it considered to have been given by God to Moses and which was completely binding.

Further, the oral Torah, as originally formulated in the Talmud and subsequently codified in a variety of works leading up to the *Shulkhan Arukh*, was also immutable. Even the notions espoused by Frankel that changes can be made “in the spirit of Halakha” were rejected outright. Orthodoxy came to represent a variety of groups, all of whom opposed any change to Jewish faith or practice. These included Hasidim, as well as *Mitnagdim* and even some German rabbis who were willing to accommodate Western culture as a positive factor, as long as it did not impinge on Judaism’s ancient and traditional frameworks. A leader of this camp, referred to as *neo-Orthodoxy*, was Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsh of Frankfurt.

All three of these groups eventually moved to the United States. In the case of the Reform and Orthodox groups, the ideologies accompanied adherents of the two camps as they migrated to America. The Conservative movement in the United States, while evolving ideologically out of the approach toward “historical Judaism” formulated by Frankel, was essentially an American phenomenon. Orthodox Judaism in the United States is really a loose definition for a widely diverse community of Jews whose major connection is their total commitment to Halakha. Other than that, the differences are, at times, extreme (for example, between rabid anti-Zionism to a totally committed stance in favor of the Jewish national movement and state).

The fact that the Reform movement has not only rejected Halakha as binding, but has consequently gone beyond the guidelines of Halakha in defining who should be recognized as Jewish, raises unprecedented questions not provoked by any previous example of Jewish diversity. Reform Jewry accepts that a Jew is the offspring of either a Jewish mother or father, while historically, it was only the matrilineal line that was the determining factor. Both the Orthodox and the Conservative movements reject acceptance of the patrilineal option. Similarly, the latter two movements do not condone the marriage of Jews with non-Jews, whereas Reform rabbis have been far more forthcoming in their participation at such weddings and their willingness to reach out to these mixed couples. The nature of these debates raises serious questions regarding the staying power of a united Jewish community. So far, external events, such as the Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel,

have contributed a cohesiveness to the otherwise widely variegated state of current Judaism. ■

Essential Reading

Sacks, Jonathan. *One People? Tradition, Modernity and Jewish Unity*. London: Littman Library, 1993.

Supplemental Reading

Borowitz, Eugene B. *Liberal Judaism*. New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1984.

Bulka, Reuven P., ed. *Dimensions of Orthodox Judaism*. New York: Ktav, 1983.

Gillman, Neil. *Conservative Judaism: The New Century*. West Orange, NJ: Behrman House, 1993.

Questions to Consider

1. Does anti-Semitism play a role in the maintenance of Jewish unity?
2. Why are the divisions among Jews today potentially more likely to lead to fragmentation and ultimate schism than divisions of the past?

Judaism and “Others”

Lecture 12

The tension between universalism and particularism, that is, between God the Creator and the God of Israel, is a constant factor in the Bible.

The God of the Bible is both the creator of the world and the God of Israel, who redeemed the people of Israel from Egypt. This dual role presents the potential for tension between universalism and particularism in Judaism. If God is master of the world, why should one group be singled out for a special relationship? The story of Abraham in Genesis does not explain why Abraham was initially approached by God and told to leave his homeland. Abraham’s “faith” appears only later. When God declared at Sinai, “You shall be a special treasure to me above all people” (Exod. 19:5), where did that leave all the others?

The prophet Isaiah seems to have already addressed this question. His explanation was to redefine the nature of Israel’s “election.” Israel, he suggests, was chosen for a universal purpose: God “who created the heavens...called thee in righteousness...for a light of the nations to open blind eyes” (Isa. 42:5–7). Later generations would actually use this argument of mission to the nations to justify the dispersion of the Jewish people, thereby turning what was once considered punishment for sins into a grand design with purely positive motives. This concept, of choice for a universal mission, is the major distinction between the pagan notion of national or tribal gods and the relationship between Israel and “its” God. In pagan minds, a tribal god is a fact, a given reality, and never the product of a choice—on either side. The Bible stresses that the covenant between God and Israel was a mutual one; each chose the other: “Today you have proclaimed the Lord to be your God...and today the Lord has proclaimed you to be his special people.” Maimonides, notwithstanding all his rationalism (or, perhaps, because of it) claimed that we simply cannot know what lies behind God’s actions or, in this case, the reasons for the election of Israel. Other medieval writers, such as Judah ha-Levi (Spain, d. 1141), suggested some distinct

characteristic among the Jewish people that warranted such a choice. This same idea finds echoes in Kabbalistic teaching.

Whatever reasons for “election” were given, Judaism did not create an ethnic or racial barrier preventing others from joining the faith and, consequently, the community. Judaism does not claim that it is only through a total embracing of its tenets that one can be worthy of merit. The rabbis developed the theme of “seven Noahide laws” that are incumbent on all mankind. (as sole survivor—with his sons—of the flood, Noah is indeed the father of all mankind). These laws include the three precepts for which Jews must be willing to surrender their lives: removal from idolatry, sexual

misconduct, and bloodshed. The other four Noahide commandments are: not to blaspheme, to set up a just legal system, not to steal, and not to eat flesh cut from a live animal. Those who adhere to these laws “have a place in the world to come.” Judaism is completely open to those wishing to convert out of religious conviction. The perception of rabbinic Judaism being less than enthusiastic about conversion is far from clear.

Judaism is completely open to those wishing to convert out of religious conviction.

The statement attributed to Rabbi Helbo in the Talmud, “Proselytes are as harmful to Israel as a scab,” is, in fact, a minority opinion in rabbinic literature and became prominent only in the Middle Ages when the active seeking of converts might endanger the community. The rabbis could not deny the phenomenon of righteous converts in the Bible, with one—Ruth the Moabite—being the ancestor of King David and, by extension, that of the future messiah, as well. Numerous sages of the Second Temple and rabbinic periods were themselves the descendants of proselytes. Talmudic sources were particularly fond of a motif that projected foreign rulers, including certain Roman emperors, of crossing the boundary into Judaism. The highly doubtful historicity of these stories is not the point here but, rather, the very willingness to indulge in such wishful thinking.

Although the “national” or communal aspects of Judaism play a definite role in Judaism’s self-image, we should note that these are frequently tempered by an emphasis on the universal significance of the faith, as well. One of the best examples of this is a prayer recited at the conclusion of every public service. The prayer is known by its first word, *aleynu*, which in Hebrew means “it is our duty.” The text suggests that we must thank the Lord “who has not made us like the nations of the world...nor our destiny like that of their multitudes.” Clearly, this creates a sense of particularism, of being different, and suggests a hierarchy among the nations. The second passage of that same prayer, however, not only mitigates that claim but, in fact, seems to stress just the opposite: a world where all nations equally recognize God, where “idolatry is uprooted...and all mankind call on your name.” To be sure, different historical periods and varying personal proclivities led some to stress the particularistic nature of Judaism, while others opted for the universal. Early modernity saw a move back to universalism, especially among leaders of the Jewish Enlightenment, who realized that the fruits of emancipation could be reaped only by removing separatist tendencies deriving from an enhanced nationalism. Reform Judaism, picking up on this sensitivity, also stressed the universal component, and it is not surprising that at first, it embraced a decidedly non-Zionist, or even anti-Zionist, attitude. By the mid-20th century, and particularly following the Holocaust, this sensitivity was destined to undergo a major reevaluation.

All this brings us back to the first lecture and the question of “Judaism as a religion” or “Judaism as a people.” The answer seems to be that both are correct, but that different generations and different personalities—for a variety of reasons—frequently opt for one at the expense of the other. Even the ancient Roman historian Tacitus, in describing his fear of the conversion of some Romans to Judaism, realized that this move was not merely “religious” but had definite political and social overtones as well. In his case, of course, negating certain aspects of paganism meant denying the gods of the Roman state. Today, this is not the case, and nothing prevents a convert from remaining a totally loyal citizen wherever he or she chooses to live. And yet this very same convert, in chanting the daily prayers, will allude to “our God and the God of our Fathers.” ■

Essential Reading

Jacobs, Louis. *We Have Reason to Believe*, 2nd ed. London: Valentine Mitchell, 1995, chapter 12.

Supplemental Reading

Novak, David. *The Election of Israel: The Idea of the Chosen People*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Questions to Consider

1. In 19th-century Germany, Reform Judaism was joined by some Orthodox rabbis, who also stressed the mission of Israel and its universal role over the “national” component of Judaism. Did both groups share the same reason for this?
2. Certain groups adhere today to what is called “secular Judaism.” Is this a contradiction by definition?

Timeline

c. 1800 B.C.E.–c. 1600 B.C.E. Period of the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob).

c. 1600 B.C.E. Beginning of Israel’s bondage in Egypt.

c. 1250 B.C.E. Approximate date of the Exodus from Egypt.

c. 1000 B.C.E. Kingdom of David and Solomon; First Temple built in Jerusalem (c. 950 B.C.E.).

c. 922 B.C.E. Solomon’s death; division of Israel into a northern and southern kingdom.

722 B.C.E. Northern kingdom conquered by the Assyrians; the population (the “Ten Tribes”) taken into captivity.

586 B.C.E. Southern kingdom falls to Babylonians; First Temple destroyed.

516 B.C.E. Second Temple established in Jerusalem.

164 B.C.E. Hasmoneans defeat Greeks and reestablish traditional worship in Jerusalem; Hannukah.

66–70 C.E. Great Revolt against Rome; Second Temple destroyed.

132–135..... Bar Koziba leads last Jewish revolt against Rome.

c. 220..... Compilation of the Mishna by Judah the Patriarch.

220–500..... Period of the Talmud; Jerusalem Talmud completed c. 400; Babylonian Talmud between 500–600.

650–1050..... Babylonian *geonim* (heads of academy) recognized as legal authorities for most of the Jewish world.

882–942..... Sa'adya Gaon, Head of the Academy of Sura, author of *Beliefs and Opinions*.

1040–1105..... Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Isaac); author of the most widely used commentaries to the Bible and Babylonian Talmud.

1138–1204..... Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides).

1275..... Appearance of the *Zohar* in Spain.

1488–1575..... Joseph Karo, author of the *Shulhan Arukh*.

1492..... Expulsion of the Jews from Spain.

1698–1760..... Israel Baal Shem Tov, founder of Hasidism.

1729–1786..... Moses Mendelssohn, Jewish philosopher, supporter of emancipation, leading spokesman of the Jewish Enlightenment.

1818..... Hamburg Reform Synagogue opened.

1933–1945..... Nazi control of Germany; Second World War and the Holocaust.

1948..... Establishment of the State of Israel.

Glossary

Amidah: Literally, “standing”; the name of the central component of Jewish prayer, recited three times daily. Often called the “18 benedictions” (Hebrew: *shmoneh esrei*), although today, the prayer contains 19 benedictions.

Ashkenazi Jews: Jews of medieval European descent; *Ashkenaz* was the Hebrew term used to designate Germany, but as Jews of Germany and France moved about the rest of Europe, it became the overall designation of most European Jews. This term is distinct from *Sepharadim*, describing Jews of Spanish descent who then migrated to countries of North Africa, the Middle East, and portions of Europe (*Sepharad* is the Hebrew designation for Spain).

Bar (or Bat) mitzva: In Hebrew, “son [or ‘daughter’] of commandment,” but more correctly, “belonging to commandments.” The stage when a Jewish child comes of age and is required to keep the full scope of Judaism’s commandments. Boys reach majority at the age of 13; girls, at the age of 12.

Baruch, Syriac Book of: A work produced in the immediate aftermath of the destruction of the Second Temple (survived in an Aramaic dialect known as Syriac); expresses the anguish felt by some Jews as a result of the loss of the Temple.

Brit: Hebrew word for “covenant,” but today, signifying the covenant by means of circumcision.

Dead Sea Scrolls: Texts discovered in 1947 off the eastern coast of the Dead Sea; many belonged to a unique sect, with beliefs and practices that set them apart from most other Jews in the Second Temple period. Together with sectarian writings, this library also contained portions from almost all the books of the Hebrew Bible, dating from the 3rd to the 1st centuries B.C.E.

Enlightenment (Jewish): In Hebrew, *Haskalah*; movement of the late 18th and 19th centuries C.E., beginning in Germany and moving throughout Europe. Its purpose was to modernize Jewish society by introducing Jews into the cultural and social environments of Western Europe but frequently at the expense of traditional Jewish behavior and frameworks.

First Temple: Built in Jerusalem by King Solomon (son of David) in the mid-10th century B.C.E. and destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E.

Gaon (pl. geonim): Head of the rabbinic academies in Babylonia from the 7th to 11th centuries C.E.

Genizah: Hebrew for “concealment”; burial of books or other sacred written texts whose worn-out physical state no longer enables use. The place where such texts were concealed is also called a *genizah*. The most famous example of such a repository was the Cairo *genizah*, where thousands of texts were discovered in the late 19th century.

Halakha: The legal component of Jewish religious tradition, addressing all aspects of Jewish life.

Hasidism: Revivalist movement founded in Poland in the 18th century, stressing aspects of ecstatic prayer, joy, love of God, and adherence to a pious leader (*zaddik*) as no less central to Judaism than the study of Torah.

Hasmoneans: Family of priests who led a Jewish rebellion against the Syrian-Hellenistic rulers of Judaea in 167 B.C.E.; in 164, they were successful in restoring traditional rites to the Temple of Jerusalem, a victory commemorated by the festival of Hannukah.

Hellenistic period: Late 4th to 1st centuries B.C.E.; in Judaea, from the conquests of Alexander the Great (332 B.C.E.) to the Roman conquest (63 B.C.E.).

Huppah: Canopy under which the marriage ceremony takes place.

Kaddish: Literally, “sanctification”; a prayer in Aramaic sanctifying God’s name and recited at the conclusion of prayer. In medieval Germany, this prayer was also assigned to be said by mourners.

Kalam: Scholastic theological studies in Islam.

Karaism: Spinoff group from Judaism, denying the legitimacy of the oral tradition and the authority of the rabbis to interpret the authentic meaning of the biblical laws.

Kiddushin: “Betrothal”; first stage in the marriage process, also referred to as *erusin*. Originally, this stage might happen months before the final stage of marriage, but today, it is part of the wedding ceremony that entails all the stages of marriage. The *kiddushin* ceremony centers on the placing of a ring by the groom on the bride’s right forefinger, then declaring: “Behold, you are betrothed to me with this ring according to the law of Moses and Israel.”

Maccabees, Books of: Books describing the Hasmonean uprising. I Maccabees was written in Hebrew in Judaea; II Maccabees, in Greek in North Africa. The extant version of II Maccabees is a shortened version of the original. The term *Maccabee* probably derives from the Hebrew word for “hammer” and was the nickname of the leader of the revolt (Judah Maccabee).

Midrash: Biblical exposition; a literary genre following books of the Hebrew Bible with an exegetical commentary or with homiletics based on biblical themes or Scriptures. The earliest Midrashim (pl. of Midrash) date to the 3rd century C.E. and contain primarily halakhic (legal) material, while later Midrashim are more aggadic (containing materials of a non-legal character, such as stories and parables).

Minyan: The requisite 10 people required for a public prayer service.

Mishnah: First codification of Jewish law after the Bible, compiled by Judah the Patriarch (*ha-Nasi*) in approximately 220 C.E.; divided into six sections (*sedarim*), each dealing with a particular aspect of Jewish law: agriculture,

Sabbath and festivals, marriage laws, torts and civil law, sanctities (temple and sacrifices), and laws of ritual purity.

Passover: Spring festival commemorating the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt.

Proseuche: Greek word meaning “prayer” or “place of prayer”; the formal title of some of the earliest known synagogues in Hellenistic Egypt (3rd–2nd centuries B.C.E.).

Purim: Holiday commemorating the events of the biblical Book of Esther.

Rosh ha-Shana: The Jewish New Year, considered a day of judgment for all mankind.

Second Temple: Completed in 516 B.C.E.; destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E.

Seder: The ceremonious meal and recitation of the Haggadah on the first night of Passover, during which the Exodus from Egypt is described and relived.

Sepharadim: Jews of Spanish descent (see **Ashkenazim**).

Shiva: Seven days of mourning after the death of a close relative.

Shma: Literally, “hear”; the prayer, said twice daily, that is made up of three portions of the Book of Deuteronomy and beginning with the Scripture: “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.” This prayer is considered the ultimate affirmation of the Jewish faith.

Shulhan Arukh (“Spread Table”): The legal code produced by Rabbi Joseph Karo in the Galilean city of Safed in the 16th century C.E.; serves as the basis for all subsequent Jewish religious behavior among traditional Jews.

Tallit: Prayer shawl.

Talmud: Rabbinic discussions of all aspects of Jewish tradition, following the order of the Mishnah. Two Talmudim (pl. of Talmud) exist: the Palestinian (or Jerusalem) Talmud, edited c. 400 C.E., and the Babylonian Talmud, ed. 500–600 C.E. The Babylonian Talmud emerged as the basis for all subsequent Jewish legal codification and was the most studied text in the rabbinic curriculum.

Tanakh: Hebrew acronym designating the three components of the Hebrew Bible: Torah (Five Books of Moses), Nevi'im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Scriptures).

Tefilin: Black leather boxes containing portions of biblical texts written on parchment and attached to the forehead and one arm with leather straps. Usually worn during morning weekday prayers. (Sometimes called *phylacteries*, Greek for “safekeeping,” that is, from demons—hence, not the best description of a *tefilin*.)

Ten Commandments: Also referred to as the Decalogue, these were the decrees issued by God to the people of Israel at Mount Sinai, following their exodus from Egypt.

Torah: Literally, “teaching”; term used to designate all of Judaic religious tradition, but more specifically, the five Books of Moses (Pentateuch) that constitute the first portion of the Hebrew Bible.

Yom Kippur: Day of Atonement; the most solemn day of the Jewish calendar, celebrated 10 days after Rosh ha-Shana; a full day of fasting and prayer, primarily seeking atonement for sins.

Zionism: The movement for national Jewish restoration in the late 19th and 20th centuries, leading up to the founding of the State of Israel in 1948.

Zohar: The classical text of Kabbalah, appears for the first time in 13th-century Spain; was attributed to the Galilean Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai of the 2nd century C.E.

Biographical Notes

David (King): Founder of the monarchy that ruled over Israel from the 19th century B.C.E. until the destruction of the First Temple in 586 B.C.E.; the progenitor of the future messiah.

Josephus Flavius (c. 37–100 C.E.). The most important Jewish historian of antiquity and the major source of information on Jews in the Greek and early Roman periods. Josephus was born in Jerusalem to a prominent priestly family, traveled to Rome, and returned before the outbreak of the Great Jewish revolt (66–73 C.E.) that led to the destruction of the Second Temple. At first, Josephus was appointed commander of the rebel forces in Galilee, but by the end of 67 C.E., the Galilee had fallen to Roman legions, and Josephus spent the remainder of the war as a captive and confidant of Roman commanders. The Flavian emperors that came to power during the war became his patrons, hence the name Flavius. After the war, Josephus moved to Rome, where he produced four works. The first, *The Jewish War*, is a detailed description of the recent uprising, with a definite tendency at defending the Roman side and placing full blame for the catastrophe on the Jewish zealots. Two decades later, Josephus produced a defense of Jews and Judaism (*The Antiquities*) in the form of a sweeping history beginning with biblical times and concluding with the eve of the uprising. A third work, *Against Apion*, is an attempt at countering what Josephus considered to be the calumny on Jews, their origins, and religion that had become a staple of much Hellenistic and early Roman literature. A fourth work, *The Life*, represents the author's autobiography but is primarily a defense of his behavior during the uprising.

Luria, Isaac ben Solomon Ashkenazi (Ha-Ari; 1534–1572). One of the foremost Kabbalists and proponent of a new school of interpretation of the *Zohar*. Little is known of his early life, which is shrouded in legend. Born in Jerusalem, Luria moved as a child to Egypt following the death of his father. At the age of 15, he married his cousin and is said to have spent seven years in isolation on an island in the Nile River near Cairo. Later traditions would claim that his teaching was imparted to him by the prophet Elijah.

One of the very few books actually written by Luria, a commentary on a portion of the *Zohar*, was produced at this early stage of life, and almost all of his subsequent teaching was transmitted later on by disciples. Around the year 1659, Luria moved to Safed and studied with one of the outstanding local Kabbalists, Rabbi Moses Cordovero. Luria slowly emerged as the major figure of the Safed circle and developed a new interpretation of the Kabbalistic vision of the world. His approach was an attempt at harmonizing between God's initial withdrawal from the world, creating an "empty space," and subsequent emanation, leading to the process of creation. These seemingly contradictory phenomena were then applied to an understanding of Israel's process of movement from exile to redemption and may have contributed significantly to the messianic ferment that ultimately led to the appearance in 1666 of the false messiah Shabbetai Zevi.

Judah Halevi (c. 1070–1141). Jewish poet and philosopher. Halevi was one of the contributors to what is considered the golden age of Hebrew poetry in Spain. Halevi's poems (more than 800 are known) are of a secular, as well as a religious, nature, and he is renowned for expressing a deep love for Zion. One of his poems ("Zion, will thou not inquire on the welfare of your prisoners") is recited to this day on the 9th of the month of Av, commemorating the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem. Halevi's major philosophical work is his apologetic treatise commonly known as the *Book of Kuzari*, but the original title is *The Book of Argument and Proof in Defense of the Despised Faith*. The book was intended as a defense of Judaism against both Aristotelian philosophy and the Christian and Muslim religions. It is presented as a response to the search of the king of the Khazars, who was informed in a dream that his actions were not agreeable with God. After hearing the unsatisfactory presentations of the philosopher and representatives of Christianity and Islam, the king embarks on a long discussion with a Jewish scholar, thereby providing the author with a suitable stage for presenting his unique understanding of the nature of the Jewish people and its beliefs.

Karo, Joseph ben Ephraim (1488–1575). One of the outstanding codifiers of Jewish law. Karo was born in Spain just before the expulsion of Jews from that land in 1492 and settled with his family in Turkey, where he resided for 40 years. In 1537, he moved to Safed, where he became one of the most prominent spiritual figures—both as legal scholar and Kabbalist—until his death in 1575. While still in Turkey, Karo began work on his legal masterpiece—the *Beit Yosef*—a commentary on Rabbi Jacob ben Asher's *Arba'ah Turim*, one of the major codes of Jewish law. Karo justifies this work as an attempt to make order in the field of practical legal observance. The commentary took 20 years to produce and was completed in Safed in 1542. Although this is possibly one of the greatest legal texts in all of Jewish literature, Karo is probably better known for his subsequent digest of the commentary, known as the *Shulhan Arukh*, which became the standard code of Jewish law. Alongside his keen legal training, Karo was also very much a mystic and, in fact, claimed to be the recipient of the teachings of a spiritual mentor whom he refers to as the *maggid* (“preacher”). Karo's diary, entitled the *Maggid Mesharim*, records these visitations.

Maimonides (Moses ben Maimon; 1135-1204). The greatest rabbinic authority of post-Talmudic Jewish history. Maimonides was born in Cordoba, Spain, but fled with his family to Fez, Morocco (1159–1160), to avoid persecution by the fundamentalist Muslim conquerors of Spain. In 1165, he left for Palestine and, the following year, arrived in Egypt, where he settled in Fustat (ancient Cairo). Having already produced a commentary to the Mishna, he wrote his two major works in Egypt: the *Mishneh Torah*, a 14-book codification of all of Jewish law (completed in 1178), and his philosophical masterpiece, *The Guide of the Perplexed* (1190–1191). The *Guide* set out, among other things, to address the anthropomorphic attributes of God found in the Bible and, in many ways, is a philosophical interpretation of the Bible, with God, creation, prophecy, and divine providence among the topics receiving attention. Both books ultimately became part of the Jewish literary canon, but at the time of their publication, they aroused considerable opposition.

Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 B.C.E.–50 C.E.). The most prominent Jewish author and philosopher of the Hellenistic diaspora. Well versed in Greek philosophy and Jewish tradition, Philo attempted to present Judaism to Greek readers in a manner that would arouse respect and even admiration. Toward this end, he applied an allegorical interpretation to much of the Bible, although never claiming that this approach abrogates the practical imperatives of biblical law. Philo also produced two historical works, one dealing with the clashes between Greeks and Jews in Alexandria during the years 37–41 C.E. (*Against Flaccus*), and one describing the mission of Alexandrian Jews, which he headed, to the emperor Gaius Caligula, asking that the decree to set up a statue of the emperor in Jerusalem's Temple be rescinded (*The Legation to Gaius*). Philo's works were never embraced in the Jewish community but were preserved by the Christian Church.

Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzhak; c.1040–1105). The author of the classic commentaries to the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud. Born in Troyes, France, he studied at the academies of Mainz and Worms before establishing his own school in Troyes. Many of his friends and relatives were murdered during the First Crusade of 1095–1096. Rashi's commentary to the Bible combines a keen philological sensitivity, which stressed the meaning of difficult words, and the application of rabbinic exegesis drawn from the Talmud and Midrash. No less important are the author's attempts at countering the Christian biblical interpretations of his day. The clarity of the commentary contributed immensely to its universal acceptance throughout the Jewish world. Rashi's commentary to the Babylonian Talmud superseded all previous attempts and, to this day, is still the most commonly used tool for Talmudic study.

Sa'adya Gaon (Sa'adya ben Yoseph; 882–942 C.E.). Renowned legal authority, rabbinic leader, and philosopher. Sa'adya was born in Egypt, traveled through Syria and Palestine, and settled in Baghdad (922 C.E.), where he ultimately was appointed head of the Sura rabbinic academy. Sa'adya was a vigorous opponent of Karaism and prevailed in a major struggle with the rabbinic leaders of Palestine over authority for determining the Jewish calendar and holidays. Sa'adya is best known as one of the first philosophers to emerge from rabbinic ranks. He was influenced by contemporary Islamic theological schools of thought, as well as by Aristotelianism, Platonism,

and Stoicism. His major work, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, set out to provide a rational basis for traditional religious concepts and served as a polemic against the perceived heresies of his day.

Simon bar Koziba (commonly referred to as Bar Kokhba; d. 135 C.E.). Jewish leader who led the final military attempt (132–135 C.E.) by Jews to remove Roman rule from Judaea and reestablish a Jewish state. Almost no biographical information exists relating to Bar Koziba's background, but literary evidence on the uprising in Jewish, Christian, and Roman sources has been supplemented in recent times by significant archaeological discoveries, including letters dispatched by Bar Koziba himself to his commanding officers. Rabbinic literature indicates that Bar Koziba may have been considered a potential messianic figure by some of the rabbinic luminaries of his day, most notably Rabbi Akiva. The war was catastrophic for the Jews of Judaea, who not only suffered casualties in the tens of thousands but also lost their demographic superiority in major portions of their land; according to the Roman historian Cassius Dio, the toll on the Roman army was also severe.

Yohanan ben Zakkai (c. 10–80 C.E.). Rabbinic leader credited with establishing a new center of Jewish leadership at Yavne following the destruction of the Second Temple. Yohanan ben Zakkai was apparently from a priestly family, but seems to have been a member of the Pharisaic circles of the late Second Temple period that ultimately served as the forerunners to rabbinic Judaism. Talmudic legend describes Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai being smuggled out of Jerusalem in a coffin during the Roman siege of the city. When he appeared before the Roman general, he predicted the latter's imminent appointment as emperor and was rewarded by the general with permission to establish a center of learning at Yavne with his immediate circle of disciples. Although clearly an anachronistic attempt to explain the survival of Judaism in the aftermath of a catastrophe, the story nevertheless recognized that the legal steps and ordinances established by the sage were aimed at establishing an alternative system of religious behavior, as well as a new authority structure, based on a slowly emerging rabbinic leadership, rather than the earlier priestly control that was centered around the Temple.

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